

On Writing and Transformation

One Story at a Time

A Thesis

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Dedication

To Allan MacCormac

Who in the beginning, and in the end and all the years in-between—

Taught me the value of now and keeping my feet on the ground.

Who in the beginning and in the end, and all the years in-between—

Through all the laughter and the tears,

Through all the joy and the fears—

Who always loved me and knew that I always loved him.

“Forever and a day.”

Donna

On Writing and Transformation:**One Story at a Time****Abstract**

In this thesis who I am as a writer emerged from the act and art of writing. I set out to tell two stories (one fiction and one life writing story) and discovered a third— the story that writing taught me. I employed writing as a means of inquiry and discovered that the act and art of writing (regardless of the genre I practiced) is a creative process that involves reflection and holistic awareness and can lead to transformation.

Keywords: writing inquiry, fiction, life writing, reflection, holistic awareness, transformation

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Chapter One: Introduction

In the beginning I had what I thought was a tight and tidy thesis plan. Using a blend of arts-based and arts-informed approaches, I intended to study place. And then my husband, Allan, died, and for days, weeks and months everything stopped. I no longer cared about much of anything, including my tight and tidy plan. My interest in place seemed trivial. I didn't know if I would ever finish this project. But I always knew deep inside, that I would come back to writing.

Whenever I procrastinated on a writing project in the past, Allan often encouraged me to "Just write it". And so with Allan in my heart and head, I began to write again and found refuge in writing. Eventually, writing provided me with a renewed sense of purpose, promise and possibility.

Throughout this thesis process, I purposefully engaged in two very different writing genres: (1) fiction and (2) life writing. As I alternated between these genres, my thesis evolved and my focus shifted. The act and art of writing became central and as a natural part of that evolutionary process the questions and themes below emerged. I often wondered and still wonder about the infinite possibilities inherent in the creative act of putting words on a page. But for the purpose of this inquiry, I settled on the following questions: 1) How does writing contribute to our understanding of self and others? 2) In what ways does creative writing focus our attention and awareness differently? and 3) By what means might writing lead to transformation?

As I wrote and contemplated the above questions, three themes became apparent. Writing, in this case fiction and life writing do generate unique pathways to: 1) Reflection, and 2) Holistic Awareness that result in 3) Transformation.

The essential method for this project has remained constant in that over the course of this inquiry, I've engaged simultaneously in two writing processes— fiction and life writing. However, given that my context was so fundamentally altered, it is not surprising that my thesis plan underwent a metamorphosis. It is also true that writing, the act and art of it, helped to fuel the metamorphosis. It took me some time, but as the process evolved, I came to understand that my work, an inquiry about writing that employs writing as the means of inquiry, is writing inquiry.

My shift in focus and learning to learn through writing was gradual. I built a habit of writing. I alternated between fiction and life writing. I incorporated reading into my schedule as well. I understood that a habit of reading was also vital to the writing process. Steven King (2000) highlighted the value of reading in *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft*, "The real importance of reading is that it creates an ease and an intimacy with the process of writing; one comes to the country of the writer with one's pages and identification pretty much in order" (p. 150). As I read what writers had to say about writing (researchers using various arts-based and arts-informed approaches as well as authors of fiction), I came to accept that many forms of writing might also have inquiry at its base. Gradually as I read and wrote, this thesis morphed into a piece of writing inquiry.

When I began this introductory piece on my journey into writing, I wondered about how best to describe my experience and why I chose these two genres. I wanted to find and tell truth in this project. I think that fiction and life writing are equally examples of writing inquiry and genres for seeking and telling truth. Murray (2005) put it this way: “We write not to say what we know, but to learn, to discover, to know. Writing is thinking, exploring and finding out” (p. 37). I believe there are underlying truths in fiction and life writing. These genres can provide both the writer and the reader a truthful accounting of humanity while at the same revealing our connectedness to each other.

When George Plimpton interviewed Maya Angelou for an article titled *The Art of Fiction*, he asked the author if she ever fiddled with the truth to make her story better. Angelou (1990) responded this way:

I look at some of the great novelists, and I think the reason they are great is that they’re telling the truth. The fact is they’re using made-up names, made-up people, made-up places, and made up times, but they’re telling the truth about the human being— what we are capable of, what makes us love, laugh, weep, fall down, and gnash our teeth and wring our hands and kill each other and love each other (p. 1).

To help describe life writing as another means of truth telling and inquiry and why I used it in this work, I defer to Neilson (2001):

Artful writing and artful inquiry do not need a password or a lexicon. There is no vocabulary test for this work; we simply write what we see (and hear and touch and smell and sense), who we are, what we believe, what we rejoice, discern, dream— creating from our many emerging and imagining selves lines to connect beyond (p. 267).

Truth telling aside through out the writing of this thesis, my focus did undergo a number of significant changes along the way. I no longer wanted to write about place but gradually became interested not only in the creative writing processes associated with fiction and life writing, but also in reading about what writers had to say about writing. In *Write to Learn*, Murray (2005) postulates that, “The best writing is traitor to intent. ... Writers should not build a form and pour concrete into it, but write and see what develops” (p. 13-14). I let go of my plan, drew up some courage, changed my intent and wrote to see what I, too, might learn.

Serendipity was also an important part of my thesis journey. Serendipity intervened when my thesis supervisor became my writing advisor and trusted mentor. At a time, when I needed support and encouragement to write again, Dr. Sean Wiebe was there. I wrote and worked with Sean for months and it was not until recently that I stumbled upon his thoughts regarding the exploration of vulnerability in poetry. Wiebe’s (2012) view follows:

Vulnerability respects codes and roles and the like, but washes off the dust on them with tears. Tears water the imagination, and imagination breaks with the humdrum and repetitive, washing off the dust, allowing some of what has been to surface through the layers. ... In poetry, we explore our vulnerabilities, and the resulting imagination brings integral wholes into being in the midst of difficulty. This way of living, this way of teaching cannot be planned or predicted, and yet is a rich source of possibility for our pedagogy (p. 459-460).

In the midst of my grief, serendipity intervened and I am grateful that Sean gave me permission to explore my vulnerability and resulting imaging/s. At the most vulnerable

time in my life, I dug deep and wrote about grief and joy and everything in-between and was transformed. I found strength in writing.

Although I didn't know it at first, I was slowly coming to terms with grief and all its difficulties, through, and enabled by, writing fiction and life writing. The parallels between writing poetry, fiction, and life writing as a means of inquiry became apparent. In the beginning, writing simply helped me carry on and find another way to be, another way to get by, and another way to grapple with daily living. Life writing allowed me to consider my own context and empathize with self; fiction helped me understand more about imagined others, and empathize with their changing contexts. Switching between these genres helped me broaden my perspective and point of view, but inevitably I recognized that life writing informed my fiction and fiction informed my life writing. Life writing helped me rout out a festering piece of fiction and fiction writing helped me step back a little from my pain into new imaginings. Both writing styles helped me get unstuck.

As noted earlier, I discovered three central themes in my work. It was a gradual process but over time I realized that writing (it didn't matter if I engaged in fiction or life writing) is a creative process that is about and involves reflection and holistic awareness and can sometimes lead to transformation.

I practiced open-mindedness and learnt to trust in the creative writing process. Gradually, I became aware of the possibilities. Walsh (2012) describes her process of finding possibility in writing this way: "I write to my own reflections. I want to be awake to a practice of writing that might open new things, new ideas, insights, emotions, feelings—new ways of being and knowing" (p. 276). Writing would often lead me to new ways of thinking, learning and knowing. I found truth by telling truths. I wrote and in

doing so touched, relived and even came to understand a little about both the pain of loss and *joie de vivre* once shared, now mine alone forever. I sought and sometimes found clarity in writing. Writing became about language and nuance, deep thinking, a means to let go while holding on. I found a friend in writing.

I told my story and imagined the stories of others. As I wrote, I thought and wondered deeply, agonized and found joy. As I engaged in this thing called writing, I was transformed. About writing, I feel a kinship with Murray (2005):

At my writing desk, I have discovered and explored the mysteries of life. I have survived the tragedies that enter each life— hurt and loss, sickness and death. ... Writing has also brought me the gift of concentration as I become lost in my craft, searching for the right word, creating the phrase that gives off sparks of meaning, constructing sentences that flow and paragraphs that satisfy, tuning the music of my voice to my evolving meaning. Writing has been my therapy and my craft (p. 320-321).

Chapter Two: Orientating the Work

Russell Townsend and Maya Marshall died twenty years ago. They had a daughter, Elspeth. El was ten-years-old when her parents died. I imagined their story. My husband, Allan MacCormac, died last year but it still feels like he died yesterday. Wish I had imagined that. One story is an example of life writing and one story is fiction. Although I created two stories using very different techniques, I did base both on my experience with being human. I did that because I wanted both stories to ring true.

These stories are about living and dying, stories inspired by love and grief. Experiences, memories, dreams and imaginings are all represented by a version of truth that rises from the act and art of writing. I discovered a portion of these stories through life and fiction writing exercises, in diaries and letters written, or ones that might have been written by those I loved the most. Truths born of pure fantasy and whimsies were set down. I also observed and documented, captured real-time moments in words, just as a photographer might capture a scene with her camera. I relived moments from my life with Allan, breathed in the garden that Allan planted, in the home that we created and shared; and I found comfort in the smooth touch of his hand-carved paddles and furniture, precisely mitered door trims and crown moldings, paintings and stained glass, all small fragments contributing to the bigger story of lives lived and shared.

Over time, as these two stories evolved, a particular kind of truth about writing also emerged. I sorted through the mess of intersecting lives that is part of my story, our story and their story. I remembered what was, imagined what might have been or might be. And the stories took form. A story about grief and love, anger and joy— a story that

needed telling so I might understand, so I might always remember and honour the love in my life, so I might heal, might tell an honest story that is unencumbered by whatever facts might be at hand. Tiny representations of love and despair woven together with words and phrases, paragraphs and pages. I set out to tell two stories created in truth, and though unintended, maybe even propelled by a search for self. Perhaps in the doing, I have yet, one more story to tell, and that is the story that writing taught me.

Chapter Three: Day Fog

She felt the fist in her stomach tighten and her ears pop as the pilot began to speak: “Captain Mark Rousseau on behalf of Air Canada” She concentrated on his baritone voice and was reassured. Maya hated landings and take offs. They made her nervous. From her window seat, she counted four smokeless volcanoes. As the rising sun tinted the cityscape golden, she focused on a cluster of small islands in the horseshoe harbour below.

Her thoughts drifted as the jet began its slow descent. “Russell will understand. He’ll want to call her Elspeth. I like El ok.” It never occurred to her that he would be anything but happy. They had talked about marriage and children last month, nothing definite. Even so, “Not now. I’m still afraid of having his child.”

The doors under the wing opened and the landing gear unfolded and locked into position. She watched the angle of the wing flaps increase. Her left hand clutched the arm of her seat. The din of the jet engines stilled and Maya stared as the city stretched out from the sea. A dark ridge between the mainland and one of the larger islands morphed into a pure white suspension bridge. Sailboats, cruisers and yachts gradually came into view. As the plane banked and tilted away from the harbour, a runway appeared on a spit, jutting from the outer rim of the city. In the slow motion descent to Auckland, Maya watched the aqua green Tasman Sea roll up to the fairytale island country of her dreams.

Maya felt the pit in her stomach spiral up into the back of her throat. She anticipated the touch down and tightened her grip. There was the short squealing sound and familiar bump and the airship leveled out on the tarmac. In a deafening roar, the

thousand ton jet made its way down the runway. Wishing silent promises to herself, “If I can just hold him again, see him once ...” Everyone clapped as the plane taxied towards the terminal. Maya Marshall reached into the overhead bin for her jacket thinking, “Soon...”

The boom of jet engines landing and taking off jolted him from his bed. Russell Townsend struggled to shake off the grogginess left over from jetlag and four hours of sleep. He pulled the heavy drapes and looked across the hotel courtyard at an Anzac Day poster. Russell winced with the memory. After all these years, an old rage still twisted his gut. “Not a good time for rage,” he thought, “never is.” Now agitated, he wondered again, why Maya had insisted on arriving today. They would have to go directly to the city from the airport. The fog was just beginning to roll in as he parked the rented car in the underground. Russell checked the arrival screen and found a seat facing the frosted security doors. He was glad he had a couple of minutes. He patted his hair down, paying attention to the thinning area surrounding the crown of his head. He methodically pulled on the ends of his mustache and checked his watch a couple of times. He imagined holding her again.

The doors opened and closed as families with toddlers in strollers, tourists in ball caps and sun hats, people in suits with laptops and brief cases rushed through. Russell spotted Maya as she passed through the security doors. He took in her profile and felt a quiet settle over his earlier agitation. He watched her scan the waiting crowd and gaze up beyond the skylights into the day. They reached the divider and embraced across the ropes. Worry and jetlag were momentarily forgotten. He flung her garment bag over his

shoulder and in the manner of lovers reunited, he wrapped his free arm around her and they left the terminal.

On the drive into the city, Russell listened as she told him about her trip and transfers, a hold-up with American customs in L.A. that almost caused her to miss the connecting flight. He was mesmerized by the melodic rise and fall of her voice. It occurred to Russell that Maya sounded a great deal like his sister.

Russell checked his watch again as he pulled off the freeway and told her that they had lots of time for coffee and breakfast at the Charles Café before the service. Maya had heard a lot about this café and knew it had been a favorite meeting place for Russell and his friend Charlie. He parked in front of the retro style establishment with its flashing neon sign. “We can walk to the memorial from the parking lot.” He didn’t really expect to see his friend’s father, Charles Senior, behind the maître d’ podium. Russell whispered quietly to Maya, “I haven’t been back to New Zealand since college and he’s still here, dressed just the same— charcoal suit and stark white shirt.” Russell looked at his friend’s father. The seventy something restaurateur’s shoulders were stooped and his wavy thick hair had silvered. Charles greeted them traditionally with “Kia ora” and threw Maya a broad warm grin as he embraced Russell.

Maya excused herself to freshen up. Russell and Charles talked about old times and Charlie mostly. “The only time he left the country was to visit Loren.” Their conversation was cut short by a large group of patrons looking for a table. As Russell scanned the bistro for a seat, he marveled at the likeness between father and son. Their warm mannerisms, good looks, and attention to dress made them both striking.

He was glad to find the window booth in the back vacant. The window overlooked a private garden. He could see his own reflection in the window. The café was in the foreground. The edges of the oak wainscoting and brass trim around the espresso bar were soft and wavy. The reflection muted the ornate detail of the silver coffee urn in the display case. He fixated on the images and the stained glass in the entrance and Charles' silhouette. He watched him greeting other patrons with the same warmth. Thinking about Charles the father and Charlie the son, Russell wondered about his own family and early life in Prince Edward Island. He shifted his gaze and took in the climbing rose and clematis arbor in the garden outside. In the half mist, half sun, he separated pink climbing roses from lavender clematis that flowed over the two meter stone wall at the back of the garden. The flowers and vines were hanging heavy from the early morning rain. Russell looked past the almond brick garden shed as beams of sun light inched over the stone wall. Beyond the garden wall, he identified the row of pure white, two story houses. The perfectly tended garden between the first house and back of the bistro led Russell to speculate that this house still belonged to Charles. The houses were identical except for splashes of crimson, night black and jungle green on the doors and shutters. In the soft pink light of the sun, opaque shadows waxed. Down the row, Russell watched the shadows from each house on the wall of its neighbor. As his thoughts fluxed between past and present, the changing light and domino shadows transformed six homes into a single structure.

The familiarity brought forward a flood of memory and he knew in that moment that he was ready to tell Maya everything. He had wanted to tell Maya about Loren many times but never felt that it was his story to tell. Now he understood that part of the story

was his. That was the part that had for too long fueled guilt and rage and insecurity. He waited for Maya and sighed, “Now is as good a time as any to tell Maya about Loren’s rape.”

He thought about the years that had passed. He felt wedged between truth— past and present, dreams and nightmares. A line from Hamlet popped into his head: “A dream itself is but a shadow.” Russell pulled himself back from the old pain. “Am I now in the shadow of a dream or in the dream of a shadow.” Despite his best effort to hang onto the past for his sister’s sake, he also knew that time had distorted and muffled, even softened the terrible reality of the assault on his fourteen-year-old sister. He knew he should have told Maya about it a long time ago. Russell watched her return to the table and smiled. He decided that he had to find a way to make some peace with his old hurt.

Maya sat down and leaned across the table and touched his hand. He was grateful that they had found each other again. They had been lovers in their third year at the University of Prince Edward Island and Loren had brought them together again in Toronto four years ago. He thought, “I loved her then and I love her still.” They ordered coffee. He was relieved. He knew that it would be okay to tell Maya. He began slowly: “While I was waiting for your plane to arrive, I thought that I didn’t want you coming today. I was wrong about that, I have been wrong about a lot of things and now I just want to get it right....”

Russell began by telling Maya about the Anzac Day demonstration. His best mate, Charlie, wanting to take advantage of the Anzac Day crowds, and with his father’s support, had organized a small Maori human rights demonstration on the lawns of

government house. A few classmates and friends including Russell and Loren came out in support.

Maya studied his eyes. She wondered why she had never noticed the gold flecks on the edges of his iris. His pupils always looked as if they were slightly dilated with the large inner black circle dominating his pale blue iris. His long black lashes seemed to weigh down his eyelids. He was serious. Maya leaned away instinctively. After an uneasy silence, Maya asked him about the ceremony and if Anzac Day was similar to Remembrance Day in Canada.

“Anzac is an acronym for Australia New Zealand Army Core.” His big hands waved. “Anzac Day has always been more than a memorial day for vets. Feminists, gays, peace activists and Maori freedom marchers all laid wreaths at the Anzac Day services.” Russell frowned and thought of the pro-apartheid New Zealanders marchers that came out the day Loren was assaulted.

When Russell started on the 1980’s pro-apartheid movement, Maya was afraid that it would lead into one of his political tirades before she got a chance to tell him about the baby. She interrupted, “I can’t wait to meet Charlie, Auckland’s citizen of year, the Citizen of the new Millennium. That’s what the papers are calling him.” Russell wasn’t going to let Maya change the subject again. He pressed on. “You can’t know how hard it is to talk about... Remember when I left UPEI and came to New Zealand with my dad and Loren for my last undergrad year?”

Maya remembered the old heartache. She remembered everything about that time but didn’t say so. She decided to listen.

He saw the flash in her eyes. “It wasn’t about us. Remember Mom had an affair. To get away Dad accepted a guest lecturing position at Auckland University. It seemed like a good idea for Loren and me to join him for the school year. He was really broken up over it all... I didn’t call you when I got back home because... I’ll just say it. Loren was raped, just a few blocks from here. She was barely fourteen for Christ sake!”

“Charlie and his Dad had organized an Anzac Day protest to counter the pro-apartheid one. I invited Loren to come along. To make things worse, there was a South African rugby team in Auckland and the city went crazy. By 3:00 pm, there were thousands of protesters surrounding our encampment on the lawns of government house. We were a small assembly of freedom protesters, in a sea of pro-apartheid demonstrators. We might as well have been surrounded by the Ku Klux Klan.”

Maya felt herself go numb. She thought she knew Russell. She wanted to ask him, “Why didn’t you tell me about this years ago, why didn’t Loren?” The pain on his face stopped her. Maya watched him close his drowning eyes. Her anger faded and she felt helpless.

He could taste his own bitterness. He told Maya that Charles and Charlie were both arrested a few meters away from the bushes where Loren was attacked. “While thousands of this country’s citizens shouted messages of hate, three of the twisted bastards raped my baby sister. The riot police arrested my friends for trespassing and protesting without a permit. They didn’t protect or help my little sister. Neither did I.”

Maya thought there was so much about Russell to love. Russell’s eyes were still glistening and she found herself leaning towards him again. “You’re still feeling

responsible? It's over twenty years ago. Sounds like you didn't have a chance, Russell. I never would have imagined...Loren, a victim of rape. She is so strong now."

"Loren hates that word, victim!"

Maya could hear the contempt in his voice. She waited and watched the rage in his eyes soften and give way to sadness.

Russell continued after what seemed to Maya a very long silence. "It's true, sometimes I still blame myself. I got so caught up in the protest I forgot about her. For me, the whole human race lost its humanity and Loren lost her innocence."

Maya watched a couple leave the booth beside them. She wanted to hold him and wished they were alone. But even if they were, she could tell from his stiffness that he wouldn't let her hold him anyway. She reached into her purse for a mint and felt his eyes locked on her. Maya flushed and looked up at him, "How did you find Loren? It must have been so terrible."

Russell told Maya about his search. He remembered long lines in the police station and how when he finally got to the desk clerk he snapped at Russell, "We don't have time to find a lost teenager. They brought in 250 demonstrators this afternoon, all bleeding hearts." Russell remembered the blood and chaos in the hospital emergency rooms. Mothers cradled screaming babies. One student from Charlie's group sat dazed with blood streaming from an open gash over his eye. Russell tried to talk to him, but the student didn't seem to recognize Russell. He told Maya about all the frantic calls to friends. The hardest call he had to make was to his father to tell him Loren went missing in the demonstration. There were crowds of people everywhere. He said he finally went

back to their apartment at midnight and found Loren cowering in a ball, wrapped in blankets on the couch.

“I can’t describe the devastation that ended my sister’s childhood. I can barely talk to you about it, even now. Dad never talked about it, but sometimes Loren and I can.”

He told Maya, “A couple of weeks after it happened, I had coffee with Loren, in this very booth. Fifteen years later and I still remember her young face become old and the tremble in her hands. I remember the exact words she used to describe the rape.

‘Seemed like I was in one of those out of body experiences, you know... It was as if I was looking down on my body on the couch in the apartment, disembodied, apart...’.”

Maya considered the gentle and gradual loss of innocence that was her own experience and grew sad for Loren. She held back tears and listened.

Russell’s fists were clenched on the table top. His face had turned a grey white and his blue eyes looked black to Maya. Russell whispered, “Loren was gang raped that night. Charles Senior tried to help her. A group of white protesters held him back with a knife at his throat. They raped her because they thought she was his daughter. By the time the riot police arrived, the rapists were long gone. Charles tried to tell them that Loren was attacked. Charles told us they wouldn’t listen. Instead they arrested him and left Loren alone in the bushes.”

Maya was swept up in his misery. She almost savored the depth of his distress and was aroused by his vulnerability. She imagined she could love Russell more now, powerless and frightened as he seemed. She wondered if there were other things he hadn’t told her. As she thought about these things, Russell told her that Loren never

reported the rape. Maya thought, “Why should Loren have been the one to report it. She was only fourteen!”

“Maya, Loren cried for days. Between the tears, she was a ghost. My father cried for days too. He blamed me. I blamed myself and Charles Senior and Charlie. I lost my little sister that day. The sister that looked to me for advice and protection was gone.” Trailing off, Russell added, “I’m still not sure who she became.”

“Are you able to talk to Loren about any of this now?”

“Loren never talked to me much about it after we went back to Canada but she did tell me a few years ago that there is still one image that she has not been able to shed. She remembers one man, tall, blond, muscular and soft-spoken. She says the evil on his face still wakes her some nights.”

Not really knowing what to say, Maya stammered, “Now I can see why Loren is so passionate about her teaching position at the University. I never really got it.”

“Do you have to analyze everything Maya? You don’t have to be gang raped to have a passion for Women’s Studies.” Seeing that he had hurt Maya again, Russell felt sorry. “I didn’t mean to sound so hostile.” He added something about Loren becoming a truly amazing person. Russell reached under the table and pulled her towards him, whispering, “What a great asshole I can be. I don’t even know how good I have it now.” He searched her face. She finally smiled and squeezed his arm between her knees. Her eyes were glassy under the halogen lights.

“Loren never blamed me. In some ways I wish she had. Charlie did a lot for Loren. He called her every day. He took her out for coffee. He was the big brother I could not be. As they became close, I felt shut out. How does a sister talk about rape to a

brother? Once Mom arrived, Loren didn't want to see any of us, Charlie, my Dad or me. She went back to Prince Edward Island with my mother a few days later. My father and I couldn't be in the same room for a long time after that. I wish we'd had more time to talk through it."

Loren and Maya had hit it off from the first time they met back home. Instead of saying this to Russell, Maya said, "Loren is special. The kind of person that everyone wants to be close to, more than popular, richer you know, really special."

"Loren attracts people," he agreed, and in the same moment wondered if Maya could understand his pain.

Looking closer at Maya, it occurred to Russell that Maya tried too hard sometimes. Her awkward attempts at elegance often fell short. That was part of her charm. Maybe it was the new red tint in her hair that reminded him of mahogany veneer or her perfect French manicure made tacky by tiny flower decals. He looked at the skin around Maya's eyes and wondered. Did she have surgery? She would be forty in a couple of years and she still looked like a twenty-five-year-old. It suddenly dawned on him that he was avoiding his pain again, pulling up his defenses by finding fault in the one he loved. "Some peace making with my past," he thought, and felt ashamed.

Sensing his scrutiny, Maya became uncomfortable. She looked away, back across the garden into the splashes of crimson, night black and spring green on the doors and shutters of the row houses. The sun was higher and she felt its warmth stream through the window. She realized that the fog and shadows of the early morning had dissolved. She saw the color return to his face, and he straightened from a hunch and Maya was relieved.

The waiter interrupted their silence with coffee and toast, Russell sighed and pulled his leg back. The couple found comfort in the smell of freshly brewed coffee and the sight of pats of butter melting on thick golden toast. She felt the coffee burn the budding cold sore on the inside of her lip and thought, “I always seem to get a cold sore at the worst times.” Maya knew the grey streaks in his hair, the thick curls on his collar, the confident, gentle lover, but this guilty, hurt and angry man was a stranger. She asked herself, “How long have we known each other? On and off since college. Why has it taken him so long to trust me?”

He felt her eyes and saw them change.

Before she could stop herself, it was out. “I’m not sure I know you Russell. We’ve been living together four years and now minutes before we have to meet Charlie and Loren you decide to open up. Is it because we only have a few minutes and not enough time to talk? Is that it? Is that why you’re telling me this now?” Within an instant she regretted her words and lamely added, “Maybe if we communicated differently, it might be better with us. I mean, I could think more and talk less, and if you talked more and thought less, you know, we might come to understand each other better

Chapter Four: What Now?

Reflections: Allan's Gone

November 25, 2013

Holidays keep on coming, marking seasons and time in days, weeks, months and years. In pain and tears, I measure and mark the passing holidays. I remember how we celebrated. Often just the two of us, Allan and I celebrating our Anniversaries and birthdays, Thanksgivings, Christmases, New Years.

Allan died on July 4th at 8:15 a.m., fifteen days short of our anniversary. July 19th was to be a big anniversary too, forty years. We began to celebrate early last fall and bought a motor home. Hours over morning coffee, we studied maps and online campsites in the U.S. southwest. In October, we took our new RV on a couple of dry runs. In Kouchibouguac, a young black bear walked right through our campsite, in broad daylight.

We headed south on a cold day in January. I never imagined that it would be our last journey. I took a picture of Allan from my seat, as he drove over the Confederation Bridge. He smiled as early morning rays pierced the cloud cover and touched the ice flow below. We traveled five thousand miles to the Rio Grande, the great river that runs between Texas and Mexico. In the mountains and river deltas, we hiked five hundred miles and climbed over five thousand feet. I like the symmetry in these multiples, but Allan might check the accuracy if he were here. Months together on the road, just like in our twenties. It always amazed me how we slipped back into traveling; together 24-7 was so easy. Always close enough to talk and touch.

I wept alone on July 19th. I didn't answer the phone. I didn't go out. I didn't answer the door. I wanted to be with my thoughts. I thought about Allan, I thought about us. I thought about what we had. I thought about what I'd lost. I half hoped Allan would send me a sign, a last goodbye, but it didn't happen.

I didn't know what to do about Allan's birthday either. September 26, I always made Allan an apple pie. Flakey crust and overstuffed with a little cheddar on the side, that's how he liked his apple pie. Apple wedges piled high in the middle, not mushy, not crisp, soft yet intact.

The first time I made Allan an apple pie we were living in a bachelor apartment in Calgary. There was an old-fashioned refrigerator with rounded sides in the kitchen area. I put the pie on the top of the refrigerator to cool. Just as we finished eating the rubber chicken and burnt potatoes, the only perfect part of the meal, the pie slipped off the fridge and landed upside down on the floor. I was upset but Allan cleaned the pie off the floor and served himself a piece. He asked for some cheese and laughed: "An apple pie without cheese is like a kiss without a squeeze." We began a tradition. For weeks before Allan's birthday this year, I thought about making a pie, I thought about it a lot. In the end, it didn't seem right. I don't think I will ever bake another apple pie.

Thanksgiving a few weeks later and the annual dilemma: "Who is going to cook the turkey? Who is going to host the family?" Not sure why but I volunteered to have Thanksgiving at our place. Maybe I thought it would be easier at home. Maybe I didn't think about it at all. I'm discovering that it's the little unexpected reminders that cut the deepest. In the case of Thanksgiving, I was shattered when someone said grace and gave thanks for all the people in our lives. No mention of Allan and I felt the profoundest pain,

felt it behind my eyes, shoot across my chest and settle in my gut. I don't think anybody noticed except, maybe, my friend from Toronto.

I had to face my birthday a few weeks later, November 12. I can remember thinking, "Will it ever stop? They keep going on and on. I want to forget holidays, birthdays. What's to celebrate: another reminder that Allan is not here, not here to take me out for a nice dinner." There wasn't a pretty and sentimental card. Not what anyone else might expect of him, but Allan always bought the sweetest cards. It took me a long time to understand his love, deep and quiet. Expressed in the beauty of the things he crafted for me, paddles and desks, wooden jewelry boxes and cutting boards and stained glass window art. Love expressed in his eyes and touch and 'huggy' bear embrace, not so much in spoken words.

More friends from Toronto flew in: "...to take care of me, to take me out for my birthday," they said. How did they know I needed them? I didn't want to go out at first, but I did and was grateful. Friends let me cry, and talk about Allan. Friends seemed comfortable with the depth of my pain. It seemed to me at the time that my family wanted me better, back to normal maybe. I will never be back to normal; I will never be the same. Maybe they hurt to see me hurt so much. Maybe it is me who wanted them to think I was getting better. For whatever reason, I didn't talk much about Allan to them.

I heard Christmas music on the radio the day after my birthday. The stores were already decorated. November 13 and Santa and presents and Christmas trees had popped up everywhere. It felt like my neighbors illuminated my despair when they turned on their Christmas lights the last week of November. It is not so much Christmas day but the seven-week lead up that I dreaded. I saw men's clothes in flyers and stores, hiking and

kayaking gear, heard new blues tunes and knew there is no point. I hated the thought that I couldn't shop for Allan.

I booked a trip to St Lucia. I felt a need to escape the "who is giving, wanting, surprising, and entertaining whom." I booked a trip that we would love. A place in the sun, on the beach, a small coastal resort at the base of Jade Mountain. I love the image that Jade Mountain evoked. The website advertised rain forest hikes, sea kayaking, snorkeling, bird watching and waterfall excursions. There was a spa and daily yoga classes too. I booked a room with three walls. Instead of a fourth wall, the architect/owner built a terrace into the room. "It might overlook the ocean," the agent said. I hoped, but a view of the mountains will be just fine too. It wasn't an easy decision to travel alone, but staying home alone seemed harder.

December 8, 2013

I remembered how we laughed whenever we heard the Beatles' song: "Will you still love me, will you still need me when I'm sixty-four..." I heard *When I'm sixty-four*, this morning and smiled and cried too. I cried because Allan wasn't here to smile with me and I cried because he won't be here when I'm sixty-four. I smiled because I felt the lightness in the song and I smiled because we made that promise to each other so long ago.

Sometimes I saw us as one, sometimes as two, sometimes as the other side of the same coin, sometimes each alone, sometimes not. Sometimes in different spaces, sometimes in the same space, sometimes polar opposites, sometimes yin and yang. That was then.

This is now. I am coming slowly to accept that Allan won't be here when I'm sixty-four, he won't be here tomorrow and he's not here now. He missed our anniversary this year, our birthdays, Thanksgiving, and he is going to miss Christmas. Perhaps, whilst still holding Allan in my heart, I might grow into the empty space that I used to occupy when I was a part of us. For now I just miss him and I will continue to cry or smile, as I please, whenever I think of our time together.

December 10, 2013

Christmas is closing in. It's suffocating. I have his gift already. Don't know what to do about that.

I heard a widow on the radio this morning talking about her husband who died four years ago. They lived together for thirty-five years. The thing of it is— as she described her struggle to remember details of him, I could only think that I didn't want that to be me in four years.

How we talked after they found the first cancer. I can still see Allan sitting by the window in the sunlight. "This is as good as it gets," he said. It seems to me now that in that moment, Allan began to embrace the best of whatever was left. And embrace the short three years after, he did.

As for me, in the grieving days, weeks and months since his passing, I have to think, this is as good as it gets and I too must embrace it whatever it may be. Like the widow on the radio, I will probably forget some details. I can only hope, if I continue to record as much as I can about our life together, maybe I won't forget too much, maybe.

Allan really was handsome; not sure I told him that much. I loved his wavy red hair and closely trimmed beard. I loved his legs too. Allan had great legs, long and

shaped, ending in the smallest, cutest bum. He looked great in shorts. When I close my eyes, I can still feel the thickness of his wrist and warmth of his big hands, see the faint, fair hairs on his arms and legs shine golden in the light. When I look at just the right picture, I bask in the warmth of his smile. Sure, everyone's eyes sparkle but not like Allan's. His eyes were not really brown, almost copper. I used to tell him that he had bedroom eyes. In the distance, I can still hear the deepness in his voice and the rasp of his voice after the surgery. I wish I could smell him. I loved how he smelt before cancer. I used to sleep with his shirt when he went away on business. Although I never told him, I hated the smell of illness that sometimes permeated from the bathroom— all that medication.

Truth is never two-dimensional and neither was Allan. As I reflect and document, I fear that I might waver on my commitment to the truth. Setting a thing down in writing is more permanent. I don't want to dishonour or disrespect Allan or our relationship. Just as it took me a long time to understand that Allan's love ran deep and quiet, it took me just as long to understand his temper, sometimes smoldering and sometimes raging. His temper quieted with age but I felt it was always there, just under the surface (at least I used to think that it was; now in hindsight, I wonder if I might have been wrong about that too). For example, I remember how he stormed when my brother and I paddled out past the harbour into the surf. When we pulled into shore, Allan yelled at us, "You took too much risk. What is wrong with you?" I can still hear the anger. I thought he was over-reacting but now I can understand that he saw a danger that we missed. If only I had asked him more about what he was thinking that day...

Not to let myself off the hook. I could easily get caught up in my own world and disregard Allan's concerns. We did know how to fight! We fought, I think, because we worried about different things. It seemed to me that he worried too much about our financial security while I worried about our health and emotional security. We didn't always respect each other's point of view. In the end, Allan was always better at letting things go than I was. He said what he wanted to say and that was it. What I want to say is we were not perfect. We fought, we held back some things, we didn't always tell each other the full truth but what we did together we did with passion and that is enough for me now.

Certainly there is so much more to our story. If I grow stronger, I might set more of it down. But not here, not now. Maybe later I will be able to write about more of our history and some of my 'what if's'.

It is a tough time of year with Christmas and New Year's about to slam me in the face. I am finding sweet, rare solace thinking about some of the ways we celebrated Christmas. I remember the year Allan gave me a garment bag, a cosmetic bag and a book on China. We were just starting to establish our careers in Toronto. I was going to Ottawa in January for a conference and he also knew I was interested in China. Perfectly thoughtful gifts. Yet I found myself looking for tickets to China in the pockets of the garment bag. I tried to hide it but Allan knew right away. What was I thinking? And the year he made me laugh all Christmas day. At the time, we back-packed and camped whenever we could. There were oodles of pretty, carefully wrapped presents under the tree for me. There was a camp stove, kettle, dishes, a collapsible dishpan and

biodegradable soap, water purifying tablets and a rain tarp. Should have known. The last gift was a beautiful gold bangle.

And what about the year of the sweaters? I loved sweaters and so did Allan but not for the same reason. I like to be warm and he liked the way I looked in a sweater.

Our first Christmas, we didn't have money for decorations so we strung popcorn and cranberries and made ornaments for the tree out of tinfoil. At the time, I never understood my mother's advice, "You can't live on love." I think we did just fine on love.

It was only three years ago when Allan lit up the flagpole with Christmas lights. He said, "I want to make sure the people across the bay can see our lights." Indeed they must have. Lights pulled straight from the top of the pole, out to the ground shaped into a 30' Christmas tree.

I surprised Allan too sometimes. Because he was tall, Allan had trouble finding sweaters and shirts with long enough sleeves. I decided to make him a sweater. I didn't even know how to knit at the time. I thought, "How hard could it be?" I began it in October. He used to like telling everyone about the sleeveless sweater I gave him for Christmas that year. I finished the sweater sometime in February. I thought that sweater would never wear out. The story never did.

And there was Christmas in Athens. Allan had the flu on Christmas Eve. I decided to go out alone and pick up a few more gifts and a small tree for the hotel room. I wasn't on the street long before a man approached me. As I struggled to understand him, he reached into his pocket and pulled out a money roll. Finally I understood and escaped,

embarrassed and humiliated. I managed to get a few trinkets and a small tree and a new story.

We've spent Christmases in Edmonton, Calgary, Kelowna, Lima, Athens, Toronto and Sanibel Island, Charlottetown and finally Grand Tracadie. Lots of turkey and stuffing, presents and trees. Document and embrace, save memories— these are the only gifts I can give Allan now.

December 23, 2013

I wanted more time. My friends came to the hospital a few days before Allan died. I told them, "I want to take Allan home one more time." I believed I would, I wonder if he did?

We didn't talk much about dying when the second cancer was diagnosed, lungs this time. Allan joked, "Guess I won't be needing a hip replacement after all." I knew it was true but still I rationalized; there was time for us, maybe even time for a new hip for Allan. We would have the summer and our annual fall vacation and maybe one more trip south in 2014. I convinced myself that the chemo would buy more time. "The treatment is risky," the doctor said. It was Allan's risk to take, but I sure as hell didn't imagine that the first treatment would kill him. I went to all the appointments and I loved Allan for his strength, vulnerability and openness during that time.

Sometimes I wonder if we should have talked more about the possibility of Allan dying. Those last days for me were all about a little more time, just a little more time together. We kayaked the week before Allan went into the hospital. He made sure all our cottages were open for the tourist season. He cut the grass and edged around all the

gardens. I can still see him sometimes, out the kitchen window, walking between the cottages, turning on power and water, and making small repairs to decks as he went.

In the hospital Allan told me, “You are doing great.” The day before he died, he labored one last, “I love you.”

I’m writing this from St Lucia. It took me twelve hours to get here, door to door, and it is going to take me nineteen hours to get home, lousy connections. There is lots of time to think on an airplane. Flying down, I kept asking myself, What am I doing? I knew I wanted to escape the Christmas hype—the tree, the shopping, and the plans for dinners and get togethers. I am 3,630 kilometers from home. Maybe I wanted to escape the fact that my mother is dying too, cancer in the lungs, I can say the words but I am not yet ready to face that kind of reality again. Mom started on morphine the day I left. I know too much about what is coming. I am in St Lucia; I am in the Caribbean, just off the north coast of South America. I am still overwhelmed. I have not escaped.

Maybe escape had nothing to do with why I am in St Lucia. Maybe I am still looking for Allan in the kind of place we used to go. This place has all the hallmarks, a temperate climate and it’s off the beaten track. It is quiet, lush, beautiful, mountainous, surrounded by a glorious sea. It has lots of hiking and paddling options, bird watching, and swimming and snorkeling beaches. Eating perfect food, walking an idyllic beach, swimming in gentle warm waters, alone, sweet loneliness in a Caribbean paradise, aching for my love lost.

Maybe I am here not only to escape the awful pain that grief inflicts, but to look for myself, whatever that self is ... without Allan. Looking for myself, what a cliché. So I am a woman traveling alone and surrounded by couples. There are couples at home to

surround me but I don't have to think about that in the same way there. There are not many women traveling alone or, for that matter, not many men. Travel accents life and social norms in a way that day-to-day living cannot. In the middle of the night, under a gauzy mosquito net, some clarity emerges. I realize that I am somewhere between being a part of a couple and being alone with myself, confidently.

I am strong in part because of the adventures I shared with Allan. I am strong because I can make this trip alone. I can hike in the rain forest because we made love on the slopes of Gros Morne. I can hike alone because Allan led me, excited, up a trail in the Rockies to an alpine meadow in full spring bloom with a grizzly in the distance. I can kayak in open waters in a foreign sea because we learnt to kayak together amidst the rocks and islands in Georgian Bay. I can snorkel and not worry about the sharks and I can smile at the gecko in my bathroom and remember Hawaii and Ibiza. "In Maui," Allan used to tell everyone, "Donna woke up the hotel and probably the block with a blood curdling scream when a little gecko scurried across her foot in the shower." I can still see Allan scramble, with horror on his face when another gecko got caught up in his shirt on the cliffs of Ibiza. Geckoes make me smile.

I still wish from the depths of me that Allan and I could have had just a few more minutes, days, weeks, months... People say we were blessed. I don't feel blessed. I knew love— love known through a look, a smile, a simple gesture and a warm touch. Love from across a crowded room, love over morning coffee, love without enough appreciation sometimes, love in my veins. I knew love and it's gone forever and I am angry about that.

Even in paradise in the early hours before the sun touches the horizon, I think about death and too much dying. I awake in paradise and think about my father and grandfather and Allan.

Just after my father died, I was driving to work in Toronto when I noticed a silver Mercedes sedan in my rearview mirror. I could see that the man driving was well dressed. He wore a sparkling white shirt accented by an indigo tie. His face was suddenly illuminated by a sunbeam streaming through his sunroof. He seemed very happy and if only for a second I saw that it was Dad following me. Till this day, I could almost swear it was Dad following me to work that day, same smile, same kind face and love in his eyes. The thing was, my father was not wealthy and never owed a Mercedes Benz or any other luxury car. I was shocked but couldn't pull over because of the traffic. And then the vision disappeared as the Mercedes turned left and away from me.

Awakening under the mosquito canopy, I think about my grandfather too. When he died, I had a dream Grampy was wearing a shiny black top hat and a tux and a polka dot bowtie. My grandfather always wore a bowtie, sometimes with a coloured shirt, more often a plaid flannel shirt, but I never saw him in a tux. It was not a pleasant dream, it scared me a little.

So I can't help but think, when is Allan going to show up for one more goodbye?

Today's word from home doesn't sound good. Palliative doctors and nurses are getting very involved with Mom. "Mom's pain seems to be the problem today," my sister writes. I tried to get an earlier flight. "Impossible," the concierge told me. So I kayaked, swam and made time for the sunshine. Made as much of the now as I could, going home soon anyway.

I spent the night with Mom before I left. She insisted that I take her favorite lamb's wool wrap with me. "For the plane," she said. "Maybe you'll get some sleep on the flight and you can use it as a blanket." I felt the warmth of her wrap all the way here, soft and light, and soothing. I didn't expect to feel like that. It was a gesture of love that I accepted.

I needed these lazy days and they were the best kind, deeply restful and guilt free. I can't abide guilt anymore. Yet I can't help but think, "Why am I so strong, yet so sad? Why do the tears still fall, so suddenly and hard? Why did Allan have to die so young?" It's my turn for anger.

It took me a couple of days to get to the restful part of my vacation but the winding down process was worth it. I saw an orange crab today, a hairy orange crab with tiny black eyes on a small body, zigzagging on the beach. I imagined if I magnified this sweet little creature by one thousand, I would have a wonderful cartoon monster. Everywhere I go to eat, there are waitresses in traditional costume. Swaying waitresses made so by the swing in their red plaid crinoline-filled skirts and bib bodices that hint of colonial Britain embedded in loud coloured displays of the Caribbean. Their headdresses match the material in their skirts and are wrapped to points in the front. I asked one waitress about the different number of points on the headdresses. She laughed, "One point signifies that the woman is single, two points indicates that she is engaged, three means that she is happily married and four points means that although she is married, she is still looking for a man." Old half-truths for tourists.

Going home tomorrow and just beginning to appreciate the differences between aloneness and solitude. I love that the people here refer to a light shower as a dusting of

rain and that the local graveyard is called the Hotel California, and that the secondary road to our resort is called the Christian Road because it is so holy. I love that my kayak tour guide wore dread locks and spoke bitter truth about the slave trade as we paddled beneath rainforest covered cliffs and volcanoes. He was articulate and understood his history. The contempt in his voice was refreshing against the resort's backdrop, refreshing after all those forever smiling service personnel. Before I go back to the snow drifts and the ice storms and face more pain and dying, I wonder on the eve of my departure if there is some peace to be found for the living in the histories and legacies of those who have left us behind.

Chapter Five: Maya's Place

Maya was first. I came to learn that was my mother's way. Can't say how but I found myself standing in front of her building. Mid-July, uptown Toronto and the temperature hovered around 33 degrees Celsius all day. It felt like the humidex was off the chart. A hot gust circled the Yonge-Eglinton towers and some grains of sand blew into my eyes. I was still wiping the tears and felt grit from my cheek when I got off on her floor. I hoped my mascara wasn't smudged. The next thing I remember was standing in front of her apartment. There was a brass knocker with the matching brass number below: 1901.

"El is that you?" Maya opened the door and invited me in with a warm hug and joy on her face. There was a small antique table in the entrance. Hanging over the table was a large painting in a gilt frame. There were snow banks and a horse and sled in the foreground and a century old stone inn with a steeped roof in the background. The two figures leaning into the cold scene were faceless and formless. It reminded me of a Christmas card she once gave me. The three-foot hallway opened into a living area with a balcony at the end of the room. I felt that I belonged in her space.

It was a sweltering afternoon and the balcony door was wide open. Now and then whiffs of herbs and flowers from the planter boxes on the balcony sweetened the smog-filled air. I was sweating profusely. Maya beckoned me to sit on the compact recliner next to the balcony door so I might better enjoy the breeze.

I can't explain it, but I believed, almost instantly, that she was indeed my mother. Sure I saw pictures but the essence of a person cannot be really caught or felt in a few snap shots. It didn't occur to me to be frightened. None of it made sense. I was so young

when she died. Maya was all but a stranger to me now. Still, I felt loved. That's as best as I can put it.

Maya asked me about my life and if I was happy. Small talk wrapped in concern. She poured herself a gin and tonic and offered me one. I watched her move from the small windowless kitchen and stretch out on the long, low, yellow couch opposite me. She was medium height, maybe 5'6'. Her long chestnut hair was wrapped loosely in an elastic band with a few sprigs hanging down the side of her face. Her eyes were pale green just like my own and her feet were unusually big. She caught me looking at her feet and laughed: "I used to get the best deals on casual shoes in men's departments but always had to pay a fortune for pretty shoes. Never mind, I am past caring about all that." I gradually acclimatized and found comfort in my sweating. Maya said, "I never turn the air conditioner on in the daytime. Are you ok without it?" I nodded and waited for her to go on. She asked me if there was anything I would like to know about her or our family. I told her that Aunt Loren did her best to tell me everything but her everything was never enough. "I really don't know anything about the Marshall side of the family," I said.

"Loren wouldn't know much about my side..." Maya took a sip of gin. "Where to start? My mother taught me how to pour a good happy hour drink while slow cooking. As for my father, he was an alcoholic for years. Your grandfather was one of those binge kinds of drunks that stayed away for days. When he brought his magnanimous self home, he lavished Tom, your uncle, and me with pocket money and anything else we asked for. At least I didn't inherit that sickness. There is not much to be proud of on that account."

I listened to her husky voice and marveled at the familiar. She held her glass just as I do with her little finger floating; her head tilted ever so slightly as is my habit and our

bronze skin an exact color match. At first, Maya spoke about my grandfather with ambivalence. Her ambivalence faded when she talked about my grandmother. Maya studied the fabric on the sofa for a spell, trying to decide what to say. The softness in her eyes faded and her voice grew dull. As I watched the sadness on her face come and go, I also knew it to be my own way. “I hated your grandmother’s acquiescence. She never argued with my father. She would do anything to keep the peace. Meals, cleaning, small repairs, everything. From my point of view, she might just as well have been single! While he sat on his ass in front of the television drinking beer, she waited on him hand and foot. She scurried through my childhood while he sat and drank.”

The skyline across her balcony changed. Through a radiant haze, I watched a black cloud engulf the white, muted sun and its halo. We listened as the thunder grew loud and saw a flash of lighting over the buildings to the south. For a while, the sound of rain falling on the concrete balcony and glass table top soothed me. I felt the slick leather chair cushion under my legs and realized that the back of my pants were soaked. Melancholy drowned the warm glow of our spent gin.

“Your grandfather was like this storm. Come and go in a flash with opinions on everything. His friends called him Hurricane Cam. Like the teeming patter of this rain, I did love the sound of his voice. I think it was the Island accent. He had a deep belly laugh too. I used to have regrets but think now I did my best. Maybe now in retrospect, I could say I owe that ability to my mother and her ancestors. We come from descendants of Louis Riel. Imagine Métis descendants immigrating to Prince Edward Island!”

Just then a big cat came into the room. He was black and white with a little pink nose. Maya reached for him: “His name is Charlie. He reminded me of an old friend of

your father's." Charlie purred and rubbed himself against her dangling legs and after a time, stretched out at the foot of the long couch. As she stroked Charlie her easy smile returned. The resentment in her voice was gone too.

"He is more like a dog than a cat," I said.

She agreed and laughed. I noticed her infectious laugh, deep and sincere, and I was also enchanted by the cadence in her voice.

"We learned about the hierarchy of discrimination early. Especially Tom, he looked Métis. I look more like my father. About that, Tom would say; "God bless Canada." I suppose my father and PEI were too much for my brother Tom. He was killed in Vietnam but you know that much."

I listened and could almost understand how prejudice would drive a nineteen-year-old Canadian boy to become a mercenary in the US army in 1970. By this time I was thoroughly soaked.

"I could keep talking all night but might miss something important. Your dad and I long ago decided we wanted you to know the truth. We were always afraid that something might happen and you would grow up without knowing about your roots. Roots and wings, wings and roots, were important, roots to him, wings for me..."

I listened to my mother and came to understand a little more about myself as she spoke.

"It is never simple, right and wrong I mean." Maya touched my shoulder as she passed and went to the roll top desk at the end of the couch. As I watched I thought, "She really does occupy this place with grace."

Maya rolled up the desktop and pulled out a computer monitor. “We were hoping you would come so... We wanted to share some of our history with you but never knew how to make it happen or even how you would react. I hope Russell can make it. Well here we are...” With that she pushed a button and the screen lit just as the intercom buzzed.

Chapter Six: Pain and Prepositions

Reflections: To My Thesis Supervisor

February 6, 2014

Last week, Sean, you'll remember we had a conversation about pain and writing. Something you said about prepositions stuck. I was thinking out loud about how my life writing, and indeed my fiction, reflects the pain of my grief. I told you that I was writing through pain and just by mentioning prepositions, you helped me consider some broader dimensions. Yes, I am writing through pain but I am also writing in pain, under pain, sometimes just above the surface of pain, possibly even alongside but certainly not yet over the pain. A simple prepositional change and I can glean all that is my grief in this moment: hope and dread, gratitude and despair. I can feel love and longing in the depths of my being and know that I am so alive, yet so much has died in me.

Consider this. I began my life writings by writing as if Allan was listening. In this piece, I am purposefully writing about grief and change and writing about Allan, not to Allan. I started to write this piece to Allan but it was too hard, I am too vulnerable. Everything has changed since Allan died. And now with the loss of my mother three weeks ago, it is a wonder I can get out of bed in the morning. But get out of bed, I do. I find little ways to cope. For instance, by shifting my imaginary audience, I am removing myself from conversing with Allan. I am still writing from a place in my heart but I don't have to imagine, with every word, what would Allan think, say or do. I don't have to search for his smile, his touch or warmth. I can just write and through writing, I hope to understand a little more about how grief and loss have changed me and continue to change me. And perhaps I will come to understand my own transformation someday.

I am finding strength in the simplest things. The night before Allan died, my eight-week-old pup arrived from the breeder in Ontario. We bought him before Allan went into the hospital but had to wait until he was old enough to fly. I wanted a dog, thinking the dog would get us out walking together. “A dog will be good for us,” I told Allan. I knew we wouldn’t be traveling while Allan was undergoing chemo and wanted to find a way to keep us active together. We watched a video at the hospital that supported the notion of walking and pets while undergoing treatment. Allan didn’t really want a pup but knew I did or perhaps he knew more about what was coming. Perhaps he thought a pup would be good for me after he was gone. After looking at hundreds of puppies, we found ours. Allan named him Jedediah, Jed really. Allan loved the mountains and a dog-named Jed just fit. In the early days after Allan passed, drowning in devastating grief, I had this little ball of white and black fur, pure energy and enthusiasm for life, that needed me. I walked miles in those first months. As I walked and watched Jed through my tears, I felt little shards of hope trickle into my broken heart.

There were some things that Allan always did that I dreaded taking over. He looked after most bill payments. He saved and watched over our investments. He was the financial manager in our partnership. It took me months to get the payments sorted. Simply navigating the various bureaucracies was a nightmare. With every account change, I had to call an 800 number and endure long periods on hold waiting to connect with a real voice. The hard part was telling faceless strangers that my husband had died and I needed to change our account information so I could pay the bill on line. They didn’t make it easy. In the case of Bell, after scanning and emailing Allan’s death certificate to three divisions within that company, I am still getting billed for Allan’s

canceled cell phone. Just as it is the little things that make me smile sometimes, it is the little things that draw every drop of energy out of me.

I don't dread all the things that Allan used to do. Take snow shoveling. I am grateful for days like today when the snow is light and fluffy and I can shovel the steps and the walk in ten minutes flat and it looks like I moved a mountain. It gives me strength to move glittering, airy snow and breathe crisp, clean air while walking in Allan's shoes. Shoveling wet snow is altogether a different matter, but by so doing, I find yet another way to appreciate all that Allan did for me through the years.

I made other changes, little changes after Allan died. I began to sleep on Allan's side of the bed. Perhaps waking in despair so many nights, reaching out to his vacant side of the bed, the move was unconscious, but now I think that shift somehow eased the emptiness in me. So now I sit where Allan used to sit in the den. I am comforted by the enormity of his recliner chair, big enough to curl up in, room for Jed to spread out on my feet. Eating alone is easier in Allan's spot at the table too. I don't have to look across the table and see that he is not there. By putting myself in his places, I don't ache so much.

In recent months, I have discovered a different kind of longing in grocery stores. I notice couples checking their lists together, debating whether they really need an item, mothers and fathers with children, some annoyed and frustrated, some gently chatting to small children about the smell of fish or the sound cereal makes when it is shook. I notice shopping carts filled with family sized meat trays and jumbo detergent bottles and bulk packages of toilet paper and paper towels. I notice carts with one steak, one frozen dinner or one serving-sized salad and wonder if the pusher is lonely.

I saw a coyote up the road from the mailbox this morning. I wished Allan were here to share the sighting with me. I was a little afraid and did turn back towards the house. But then I got the brilliant idea to drive up the road for a closer look. Of course the coyote had disappeared into the woods by the time I got to the place where he had stood. Fresh footprints in the snow trailing off into the woods reassured me.

A friend and colleague called me last week. Kim wanted to know if I was interested in going to China on a three-week teaching contract with the college. I thanked her for the opportunity and asked for some time to think about it. Allan and I always made big decisions together. I debated the offer in my head, talked to friends and family and in the end resolved the problem by tallying the pros and cons. The pro side grew as the cons stagnated. I decided to accept the offer. I always wanted to go to China. Never imagined it this way! Allan gave me some luggage and a book on China for Christmas years ago. I started looking for the tickets, he guessed what was happening and I was embarrassed. What was I thinking? We had just moved to a new city, started new jobs and had very little money. I was looking for the pony in the barn again. Repeating myself. Maybe I am still embarrassed that I did that to him. But if I believed in angels or spirits or the like, I might think that Allan was encouraging me to go to China.

I started this piece thinking about pain and grief and how my life has changed. The simple answer to the question, “What has changed since Allan died?” is everything. Where I sleep, eat, and relax, how I make decisions and work is different. My perspective and point of view are changing and I am finding strength in the smallest of things. Since my mother’s passing, I find myself reliving Allan’s death and the sharp pain of new grief is starting all over. Yet, writing in, with, through, alongside, and on the surface

(whatever the preposition) of pain eases my struggle and may lead me to a deeper understanding of the human condition. For now, I am juxtaposed between hope and dread, gratitude and despair. Thoughts on love and longing for love still make up a significant part of my days. I am like the soft snow I shoveled yesterday, drifting, lingering on a tree branch, sometimes sparkling in the sun, sometimes cold and hard in the long shadows at dusk, both vulnerable and strong, shifting and adjusting to changes in the weather.

Chapter Seven: Russell's Grove

"It's Russell. Hope he can join us." Maya didn't move off the couch. I found the intercom and went to the door. Russell was taller than I remembered. He got off the elevator and filled the hallway. I looked back over my shoulder towards Maya. She faded. Then her apartment was gone. The gauzy curtain fluttered again and Russell called out. I followed his voice towards the pasture.

"Elsbeth, I thought if you could walk this farm as an adult, you might remember why Loren brought you home every summer. She was a great teacher. She was never much for telling but she sure could show you a lot." As Russell talked about his sister, I remembered my grandfather with fondness. I remembered PE Island and beaches and pastures and my grandmother. Grammy was serious. I was never sure if Grammy liked children. At least not like Grampy Dave did. He was funny. Not in a loud way. Often I would be walking away from him before I caught some of his humor. He always had time to talk or sit or walk. There was sweetness in the man that began with a sparkling blue-eyed smile, the kind of smile that never depended on how his mouth moved. He always seemed happy to see me and he cried every time we left to go back to Toronto at the end of the summer. Those were the days when some believed that men shouldn't cry. I remember walking on the beach with him. He always found a treasure, a rare shell, an Indian arrowhead, an ancient anchor, or a woodcarving. I realize now that Loren had often been on those walks too. I had always associated those Island memories with my grandparents and taken Loren for granted. Somehow I have erased Loren from this aspect of my memory.

I knew what Russell was saying to be true but he was getting too sentimental and it got on my nerves. Family, roots, his love of the Island were important to him and he wanted that stuff to be important to me. He was hell bent on talking about this wood grove too as if it was sacred. I didn't care if we ever got there. I had too much on my mind to really question why we had to reach the grove before dark. I was aware that Grampy and Uncle Pete were still behind us and the gauzy curtain was beyond the grove that wrapped Aunt Loren and my fiancé, Liam, and my hospital bed in its mist. All at once, I wanted to be with them all and with none of them. I didn't want to wake up when I was in Maya's apartment and in this new state of chaos; I found it easier to go along with Russell than try to wake up from here.

As Russell rambled, my escape plan percolated, gradually. As I listened to that hypnotic drone of Russell's deep sing song voice, I ached for what might have been. On the journey I had come to trust Russell; even if his nostalgia-filled stories and roller coaster emotions irritated me, I came to believe that he was my father. What am I doing here with him? I couldn't stop myself from reliving the pain of fatherless birthdays, camping trips, fights won and lost, graduations and first crushes. Where was Russell then? I used to believe that I didn't have real parents. After being with Russell, I understood that I would always be an orphan. Orphaned or abandoned, all the same. I was alone when I needed him the most.

Russell didn't seem to notice my resentment and confusion. He kept right on talking. "Every kid needs a place like this, Elspeth, where you can just be with your own joy. Alone to taste and touch and smell the single moment of joy that might be found in a simple blade of shiny, sour, spring grass or the earthy sweet scent of damp musky mud.

It's a gift to be, just being, I mean. It's the first time I have taken anyone to the grove and I can't think of anyone else that I would rather take there. This grove has always been my place, my place to be alone and to think. My refuge..."

I could tell by the straightness in his posture and the excitement in his expression that he meant every word. I could feel his urgency in the rise and fall of each breath. I didn't like it, but I was beginning to recognize something familiar in Russell. His voice sounded like Grampy Dave's, and Russell's blue eyes lit up just like Grampy's used to when we were together so many summers ago.

I was able to forget myself for a short while as we walked and I started to really pay attention.

"Elsbeth, I could tell you the exact moment I rediscovered joy after my brother Pete died. He was barely twenty. I would have been eleven. It was in the grove that I could be happy again without feeling guilty. I realized that I could be alive even if Pete were not. I sat on a rock in the middle of the field and sang to myself, danced around the hedge row and drank water through a hollow straw in the spring. That was the freshest drinking water, belly down in the damp earth with my face inches from the cool stream. I can still smell that spring water even at this distance and almost taste the straw reed that I drank from so long ago. Wait, listen, hear that? It's a woodpecker. There he is."

I couldn't see the woodpecker but we were close enough that I could smell the sap from the spruce tree that hid him. Russell came up behind me, close and quiet. He put one hand on my shoulder and stretched his left arm out over my left shoulder to give me a sight line. "I see it." A woodpecker, black and white with a red head. I stumbled over a log and scared off the bird but not before we both had a good look. Grampy Dave taught

me the basics about Island birds but Russell knew how to spot and point them out in the thicket. He knew how to watch for movement in trees and about soaring silhouettes and wingspans and birdcalls. I loved that about him.

I saw the relief in his eyes this time as he looked over his shoulder. The woodpecker seemed to soothe us both, at least long enough to catch our breath. “We are almost there. Pete and Dad will not follow us into the grove.” He kept talking as if they were all alive and it didn’t matter. “It was always my place and they will respect that. You’ll be safe for a while.” I began to think that this was not a dream and my parents hadn’t really died when I was ten. There was a terrible plane crash... I saw the pictures. Can’t think about that now.

Russell pointed to a path along the bank that led into the woods between the fields. We will have to run the last bit to stay ahead of them. I looked back. Pete and Grampy waved from Snicpic Point. I wasn’t really afraid yet. I remember thinking that there was a part of me that wanted to wait for them. Yet there was something in Russell’s gravity that compelled me to move on with him. I jokingly asked Russell when we first left the shoreline, “If we wait would it be so bad?”

Even before Russell turned back with his twisted mouth and half closed black eyes, I regretted the question, even before he said to me in a cold, flat voice, “If you wait that’s up to you. If you come with me, that’s also up to you. I had my say on the matter. Do what you like.” Russell looked offended as if I had deliberately violated him in some way. I held my breath and watched his face soften. I felt his fear and became afraid too. Afraid of what? I wondered, Uncle Pete and Grampy, never sharing a bird sighting with Russell or feeling his touch on my shoulder again? Afraid we might not make it to the

grove? Afraid that I might conjure up his anger again. I still don't know why or how I came to accept those strange circumstances.

What did Russell know about my safety or joy? In my last joy filled moment, before my accident, I had just picked up my brand new Audi and was taking it for a spin. It was exactly 2:00 pm, July 16th, and the outside temperature reading on my dash was 32 degrees C. Heading north on the Don Valley Parkway towards the 401 all I could see was a ribbon of traffic ahead and behind me. I sank deep into the new buttery soft leather seat and turned up the stereo. Pavarotti was singing *Ave Maria* when an old black hearse pulled out and passed. It was not the red velvet curtains in the open back windows that flapped in the breeze or the bearded and pony tailed fifty-something hippie behind the wheel that made me laugh out loud that day. It was the silver aluminum canoe on the roof catching a flash of a sun beam that made me smile. As I saw it that day, the canoe on the roof of that old hearse was thumbing its nose at its darker past as it made its way up the valley and out of town maybe towards Georgian Bay. I remembered my own days of paddling in the northern Ontario wilderness and thought I could trade my Audi for a hearse and a canoe. It was a special slice of joy and in that moment, I came to understand a little more about Russell and what he was trying to do for me.

Chapter Eight: On Porridge and Other Substances

Reflections: To Honor the Heart that Allan Wore

February 23, 2014

When I was a child, I wrote these lines in angst:

*Wish that I could find a hole
Just the size of a porridge bowl;
Crawl inside until tomorrow
Maybe then, there'll be no bother.*

My mother used to tell me then, “Don’t wear your heart on your sleeve.” She might have been upset with the tone of my early poems. If Mom could read some of my writings now, she might cringe still. It took me a long time to shake this advice, about the perils of putting my heart out there for the world to see. On darker, less trusting days, though, I think that Mom could have been right.

So why, I ask, do I continue to labour so that I can share, expose my soul in writing? Ecclesiastes 1.9 reverberates (Revised Standard Version): “The thing that has been done is that which shall be done; and there is no new thing under the sun.” To what end write? What have I got to say that is so important? Maybe it is not about what I have to say but more about what I am trying to learn. Writing can be sometimes paralyzing, debilitating, and yet at times, once begun, liberating, soothing and even exhilarating when a single truth reveals itself. I find motivation in those slivers of light, perhaps even enough to continue despite the doubts. In those moments, unveiled, it doesn’t matter if others already know this arising truth. The understanding is mine and my journey may continue a little bit longer.

So tell my story, our story, I will keep trying while honouring Allan and our relationship, I will keep trying to understand through writing, through story, a little more

about two lives and one death and maybe grasp some meaning and purpose from the void created by the passing of one beautiful man.

Allan taught me a lot about life in his dying. From the time he was first diagnosed, a time of hope, his mantra was always, “This is as good as it gets.” He understood time differently. I knew this by the way he took time to listen, hear, see, or just be. In the time between the diagnosis and his death, Allan gave me the gift of many little moments, precious moments that I cherish now. The woodpecker under the spruce on the fallen log in last week’s fiction was no fiction. Last spring, Allan found a yellow-bellied sapsucker in the thicket behind the barn. He took me out three mornings in a row to see if he could find this brilliant bird just so he could share the experience with me. On the third morning, he succeeded. Allan’s hand warm and soft rested on my right shoulder and his left arm stretched out over my left shoulder pointing out the elusive woodpecker. He was bigger than a robin and smaller than a blue jay. His head and throat were a crimson red with white and black raccoon like markings around his eyes. As if for us, the sapsucker puffed out his bright yellow chest in a show of spring exuberance before he flew away. There was an owlet that spring too. As big as the adult on the branch above the nest, the owlet, downy and grey, stared back at us for the longest time. Through Allan’s carefully focused telescope, I felt the softness of downy youth. And those last winter months in the USA sun, there were egrets and Aloysius the alligator, snake warnings in campsites and a giant kite show against the big blue Texas sky, fireworks and sandy dunes and arid deserts and red and green mountains, swamps and cypress trees.

I can almost taste the salt on Allan’s skin and hear his blood pumping as I lay my head on his chest after we made love or smell the dampness of his sweat soaked shirt

following a day's hike above the Rio Grande. I looked at pictures of us and noticed in so many of them, through the years, Allan's arm is wrapped around me, pulling me close into his chest. I was shorter and easily nestled into the hollow between his shoulder and chest. People always said we looked happy together. When I think of it, in a picture or not, that was a manner we had with each other, close, touching and often snuggled into one another, on the couch, in bed, watching birds or wild life or hamming it up for the camera.

If I wore my heart on my sleeve, Allan wore his in his eyes. It was rarely about the words he chose. There may have been times I didn't want to know his heart. Love and light, anger and frustration, pain and courage, fear and strength, happiness and sadness, it was all there in his eyes. If I have any regrets, it is that I wish I had asked Allan more about the heart in his eyes. But there is no going back, when someone dies, and that is indeed a pity. My comfort has to lie in the knowledge that we loved each other in the beginning and we still loved each other in end. When I think of everything I've lost, my heart aches. When I think of everything we had, I am lost.

I don't know that I can or should even try to define the meaning of life or death. Over time, I have come to know that the dying have a lot to teach the living about how to live. At different times in my life, meaning and purpose meant very different things to me. Career, possessions, vacations, friends, family, time, place, and community, I didn't always get my priorities right. Allan's mantra, "This is as good as it gets," helped me to make the most of our last days, weeks, and months. Allan knew how to live even in the face of darkness.

Meaning and purpose now might be as much about trying to keep priorities straight as it is about trying to find reason. Any glimpse of meaning or purpose or any scrap of insight regarding my experience with life and death are paradoxically connected to my sense of belonging with self and another/others in harmony in place and in time. And for that, I owe my husband so very much and honour all that Allan has taught me in his dying about living

Chapter Nine: My Silver Fox

Reflections: On Last March

March 24, 2014

It snowed that night, last March, and fresh, fluffy flakes left behind a skiff of white dust that disappeared quickly as the sun climbed above the hill over our campsite. I sat in our truck outside the laundry shed and waited. I listened to the early morning chorus of birds and watched the light change.

First I felt the chill on my skin as the draft from the open sunroof rippled up my arms. The cold from the truck's leather seat stretched up from my tailbone and met the creeping chill running down the back of my neck. I tried to forget the cold and studied the scene beyond the windshield. In a place where irises bloomed under naked oaks, century old beauty exposed a globe of branches that reached up and out, some bent, some parallel, many massive against the sharp blue Mississippi sky. Under the stand of giant oaks, I waited for the laundry to tumble dry and watched the sun crest the mountain. I smelt the cold in my nostrils, heard the rustle created by a gentle breeze and felt a crispness flow up my ankles and prickle my knees. I heard the trill of close and distant birds and wondered at a different racket coming from the woods below. As I listened the sound grew closer—the crisp crunch of dry leaves and twigs snapping. Probably the deer we saw at dawn, foraging in the undergrowth. After a time, Allan came with coffee and helped me fold the laundry. We packed up and headed west.

Between the Mississippi and the Rio Grande, between January and March last year, everything in our lives shifted around. We began to notice the changing winds first when we reached the Rio Grande. The winds were unsettling, made so, maybe, by high

nightly howling, or the early morning tornado threats that we'd heard about on the radio. By the time we reached New Mexico, the Santa Ana Winds were constant, warm, unpredictable, and pervasive. In the desert, a gust is always filled with swirling sand that sticks to your skin, leaves shards in your eyes and grit in your hair. The wind in New Mexico kept us awake at night and pushed us around all day. It was needling, uncomfortable and almost alive.

On March 9, 2013, Allan and I drove through the Guadalupe Mountains and headed for the Carlsbad Caverns. Eight hundred feet underground, the Caverns are a world heritage site in southeastern New Mexico. We had traded the howling, hot Santa Ana winds on the mountaintop for the hollow, echoing stillness and constant cool dampness of the underground caverns. We walked through shadows, fingers, sometimes streams of light and color. Browns and yellows spiraled into blues and greens and turquoise and absolute darkness. Underground, we wandered through spatial-like black holes, limestone cathedrals and columns, and frozen stalactites, and wondered if the inspiration for the Acropolis or *Star Wars* or *String Theory* or the Sistine Chapel or the Blue Mosque might not have been born right there. In that space I was enthralled, I could accept all the offerings of that time underground. I saw with new eyes and, in that depth, I put aside fear for a few hours.

But just when I had the audacity to believe everything was right with our world, everything in our world changed. When we emerged from the Caverns, Allan began to experience pain again when he coughed. I hoped it was the dampness and that we had stayed too long underground. But the pain got worse through the night and we drove into

Carlsbad the next morning to find a clinic and ended up in the emergency room of the Carlsbad Hospital.

There were about ten other patients waiting. Shortly after triage, a nurse took Allan into a treatment room. Others complained to the admitting clerk. You never want to wait in an emergency room, but neither do you want to be the first called for treatment. I wanted to tell those complaining at the desk that I wished it were not Allan's name they had called.

Allan had blood work, an x-ray and a CAT scan before lunch. We waited behind a gauzy curtain and listened to the women in the next room. We heard how they didn't want to wait any longer to see the doctor. We heard the nurse say she was sorry. As she left them one of the women shouted after her, "I hate emergency rooms."

I went to get a sweater from the truck while we waited for the test results. There was a police car parked in the entrance. As I came back from the truck, a state trooper guided a prisoner to the parked car. I noticed the handcuffs and the way the young man with the crew cut backed himself into the car, hands and feet facing me and his eyes on the ground. Another trooper carried a wide flat case to the back of the car. I watched as she placed the case in the trunk, and imagined she was securing an assault rifle. Any other day, this scene might have shaken me. I simply watched and went back inside.

An hour and half passed and the nurse returned. She told Allan about masses in his lungs, both lungs. His right lung had a couple of tumors and the left lung had six. She kept saying, "So sorry," and I believed that she was sorry and knew the gravity of the situation but still I couldn't accept it. She talked about lymph nodes and brunt blockages around Allan's heart. I couldn't stop crying. I tried but the tears flowed and my nose kept

right on dripping. I attempted to stop but knew it was useless. The nurse finally left us alone. Allan was contemplative, me too for a while. We didn't talk much at first. I crawled into the single bed beside him and we wrapped our bodies around one another. The nurse came back with contact numbers for an oncologist and a cd with a file of the test results. I started crying again, no sobs, just tears. Allan asked her to repeat the test results. It wasn't a bad dream, the cancer was back. As she left, Allan's voice trailed, "But I climbed 1,100 feet in Big Bend four days ago,"

We left the hospital and found the oncologist's office. Allan was very clear. He had to have an appointment in the morning. He wanted direction. The nurse resisted but she heard him out. That's when I felt his devastation run through my body. She softened into kindness and took the cd the hospital gave Allan, the one with all his test results and cancerous images. We were probably both in shock for the rest of that day. We drove around the little town, went out for supper. I drank two strawberry daiquiris with my meal, Allan filled a prescription for pain and we went back to our campsite below the Caverns.

On March 12, 2013, we drove back into town. Dr. Miller didn't keep us waiting. He spoke clearly and looked directly at us when he spoke. He was casually dressed, polo shirt and matching tan pants. I remember thinking that he seemed kind enough for an oncologist. He pulled up the screen with Allan's images and repeated the diagnoses that we had heard the day before. Dr. Miller was matter of fact, confident but not arrogant. He listened intently to Allan's questions and advised us, "Go home. Some of the masses may respond to treatment, don't wait." So go home we did. A year ago today, we drove

onto the Island right into the middle of a blinding snowstorm. Allan drove, I navigated and we made it back in nine days.

A year has passed and I sit here alone and remember our last days. Right up to the end, we kayaked, went hiking and bird watching, visited family and worked on projects. We carried on with the attitude that this is as good as it gets. It is hard to think about Allan's last days. That awful week in the hospital when a nurse took Allan's wedding ring off the day before he died and another put it back when I asked where it was. That awful week when I left Allan alone for a couple of hours with his ninety-year-old mother. He was upset when I got back because no one answered his bell when he needed help to the bathroom. His mother from her wheel chair had tried to help him. That awful week when we asked for help one morning and the nurse told Allan he would have to wait because she was going to a morning report meeting. So much to be angry about, and I put her on report.

But there was some sweetness in those first few hospital days. We watched baseball and talked about the Blue Jays' philosopher, knuckle ball pitcher R.A. Dickey. For a while, we cuddled again in a single hospital bed. But the machines and tubes soon got in the way and I had to sleep on a recliner beside Allan's bed the last few nights. We held hands under the cold metal rail and waited on the kindness of nurses in night darkness.

And now I wonder, sometimes in the darkness of night, if the chill that engulfed me at the top of a half-brown, half-green hill alongside the Mississippi River is the same kind of chill that crept through my husband's body five months later. Or did Allan feel the cold reach his core like the lingering dampness in the Carlsbad Caverns? Could he

breathe in the experience? Did he know I was still there? Or before the chill, did he feel a hot urgency of the kind one breathes in the Santa Ana wind, or feel a prickling discomfort like that of desert sand blasts, or feel a needling sting akin to the freezing rain and sleet that greeted us home? Did he really squeeze my hand that last night, did he know I wrapped him in my red shawl and was still not ready to let him go? Did he know I would be looking for him after? Looking for him in my rear view mirror, looking for him in the middle of the night and in the early dawn or for a last message on our anniversary, his birthday, Thanksgiving, my birthday, Christmas, New Year's Day, and Easter. Looking for him still when I walk on the beach and listen for his voice beyond the surf, or listening for his footsteps before the back screen door opens and waiting for his shadow to fill the frame, looking for him before I go to sleep, on the edge of the bed in that moment before he'd crawl in with me or across the table over morning coffee. Looking for him still in parking lots and shops, in crowds, on the lawn mower or in his truck, in the shadows over his workbench, looking for him from my kayak in the sun. Did he know I would be looking for him still, wishing for just one last sign, one last message?

There was a silver fox just off the front deck a few weeks back. The silver tips at the end of his black fur sparkled in the morning sunlight. For the longest time, he sat and looked at me through the living room window. Even when I went outside for a better look, he lingered. I wished for a moment that Allan had sent this fox to me or perhaps even that the fox was an embodiment of Allan. I pushed off the thought as whimsy. But then after weeks of helping Allan's mother with a difficult transition into a retirement home, the silver fox came back. After Elaine and I left the home for a drive around Victoria Park, we spotted him in the distance. He was coming in from the harbour mouth.

We waited as he came close. I could tell by his size that he was another male. He lingered again and I photographed his silhouette against the setting sun. I laughed and told Elaine he was her welcoming committee and I smiled maybe, just maybe to myself before my silver fox finally sauntered off.

Chapter Ten: El's Muse

"Elspeth, nobody calls me Elspeth... just El, that's it."

"Did you know Loren's second name is Elspeth and my father's mother was Elspeth? There is an Elspeth in the old Belfast churchyard too."

"I remember all right. The white fence with the turned posts, the red maple tree, Sunday school and playing around the headstones. I remember Elspeth Sarah's tombstone, speckled grey, gritty stone and patches of moss on the top and back. As a child, I smelt the earth around her stone and fingered the letters, imagined more than once... it was me down there." I recited the inscription to him,

"Elspeth Sarah Townsend 1803-1883
Beloved wife of William Henry Townsend
I fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith."

Russell touched my shoulder and said, "I didn't know... I'm sorry. But we have to keep pushing now Elspeth. The grove is not far."

I didn't really mind that he called me Elspeth. I liked the way he touched me, the way he looked at me. How had I had forgotten so much about him? I liked that he still wore a white t-shirt and smelt like sunscreen and cigarettes.

But there was no time, they were behind us still, Pete and Grampy. They weren't waving any longer. I watched the two men in the lower pasture where melting snowdrifts had soaked the ground. Russell and I had sunk in the mud a couple of inches when we came through that section. I knew the soggy ground would slow them down too.

I walked alongside Russell. I could hear his breathing, labored sometimes, and wondered about his limping. There wasn't a path anymore, just the grove ahead and a thin promise of safety. I walked and thought about the stories he used to tell me when I

was young. I thought about the railway tracks and the train at sunset, the monster in the caboose that would chase us if we were not home before dusk. I thought about the language in his stories, the long pauses and the happy endings. Mostly I thought about the sound of his voice, chesty from too many cigarettes. And his laugh, a laugh that turned into a wheezy cough sometimes, deep with an honest to god rattle. As a child that sound infected me with love and fear, and infects me still.

We reached the grove and rested by the spring. I drank water through a reed and tasted the sweet grass and felt the cold-water drip off my chin. I could see them on the edge of the pasture. Pete paced the fence line and Grampy looked down at us before he settled his gaze past the grove in the direction of the curtain.

Between the woodpecker's log under the spruce tree and the grove with the gauzy curtain just beyond, between the path along the bank that led to the woods and into the pasture, between noon and dusk, I thought a lot about my father. I thought about the soft tone in his voice and the faint smell of his after-shave in the air. I wished that my eyes were blue and danced just like his. The flatness lifted and my heart opened.

Russell took off his jacket and spread it on the ground. He sat down beside me. I must have been on his rock but I didn't move. I knew he wanted me to sit there.

"Do you still write Elspeth?"

I nodded. He was still all about timing, I thought.

"I read Stephen King's memoir, *On Writing* last week. But you probably saw it on the backseat of my car after the accident."

“Sure I saw it. I read it too, years ago. I liked the image of King’s muse, a cigar smoking, ‘basement guy’. I like that King’s muse doesn’t come to him, rather King has to go the basement and tend to his muse in the dark.”

I told Russell that I struggle more with the idea of writing than the doing of it. I told him that I think my muse lives in space, not dark space but in the light of the sun. I didn’t tell him that I have to leave my dark places to find my muse or that I have to peel back the darkness and lean into the light.

I told him, “I miss our talks.”

Russell looked across the grove toward the curtain, “Me too.”

I shut my eyes and felt the waning sun warm my face. I thought about my early years and my parents. Dad taught me about rhythm and timing in language and conversation, but Maya knew about power and language. Not that she talked to me a lot when I was child, but she did a lot of talking. She used to complain to my father, “I don’t understand why you talk to her so much, sit around and talk, talk, talk.” She often told him, “I wish I had time for sitting and talking.” But the day I overheard her scream into the phone, “Fuck you,” I understood something about the power of words. I was four years old. I heard her say the F-word that one time, but I knew the potential was always there for her to say it again and it scared me. I also knew, because she told me, “I hate that word,” that it would be better for me not to use it, and I don’t use it, even now.

“Why do you still call me Russell?” He interrupted my thoughts.

“I don’t know really, I liked keeping you and Maya in the distance after your plane crashed, after, you know... It became a habit. I can call you Dad if you like?”

“That would be great, if you want to?”

Quick as that, natural, Russell became Dad and things shifted between us.

In the distance, I thought I heard Liam calling me and felt the pain in my chest. Dad stood up and shook the grass and dirt from his jacket. He didn't look back at me or the stream, or Grampy, or Uncle Pete. I did, I looked back and saw Uncle Pete moving toward me. Our eyes met for a long second. Grampy was at the fence line still. Grampy never did cross the fence line. Dad was partly right. But Dad had underestimated Uncle Pete's resolve to catch up with us, grove, or no grove. I turned and followed Dad towards the curtain, towards the rattle of rolling hospital carts and beeping machines and the pulse of my respirator.

I started coughing and couldn't stop. Russell and the grove faded and the pain in my chest got worse. One day, cruising up the Don Valley in my new Audi, thinking about trading it for an antique hearse with a silver canoe on the roof, heading for Algonquin Park with my fiancé, Liam— just crested a hill and boom, we slam into the back of a six-car pile-up.

I heard Liam again, "It's ok El, I'm right here. You've got a punctured lung and some broken ribs, but you'll heal. You are going to be all right. I love you. Can you hear me?"

"Dad, where are you?" I called. The grove was gone, Uncle Pete and Grampy were gone. I didn't care. But Dad? Where'd he go?

Liam was near. I felt his warmth as he crawled into the bed beside me. I didn't want to open my eyes yet. I couldn't see Dad. I couldn't hear his breathing. I felt a single wet tear and the tightness of my skin below my eyes, taut skin made from other tears, long dry. I heard the nurses laughing in the hallway and a medication cart roll by the

door. I heard how the women in the next room didn't want to wait for another doctor. I heard a nurse say she was sorry. As she left them one of the women shouted after her, "I hate hospitals."

Liam said, "No shit!" and I laughed and opened my eyes.

Chapter Eleven: Beds and Straw Mats

Reflections: On Sleeping Together and Alone

April 23, 2014

I lay in bed Easter morning and thought. Mostly that I didn't want to get up. I thought about the first mornings after Allan died, those early mornings that tricked me. Wrapped in serenity grown of habit, I woke whole and felt him near. Sweet and cruel awakenings, whole for a moment and then descending into the new coldness in my bed and the black hole growing inside me.

We slept together for forty years. In our bed, I embraced trust, warmth, peace, contentment, abandonment, and ecstasy and whispered in the dark and sighed in joy. There in the quiet night I felt Allan's breath and heard the beat of his heart. I touched his humanity and he touched mine and sometimes knew divinity.

We started sleeping together in Newfoundland. We slept in a two-person tent on hikers foam in soaked sleeping bags. Stayed by torrential rain, we zipped our sleeping bags together and kept them that way. It rained for days and we made love for as long. We slept on a mattress on the floor in a studio apartment in Calgary and in the back of a camper van in the Rockies. We slept on single beds in pensions in Spain and on luggage racks in trains in India and straw mats on dirt floors in Nepal. We slept in a double hammock cocooned in a mosquito net under the canopy of the Yucatan forest and listened to monkeys howl. We slept in a whitewashed adobe below Machu Picchu. We slept in many beds double, queen and king, it didn't matter the kind. We wrapped into one another and made ourselves small. We began each night, taking turns holding one another. Drifting into dreams cuddled up against Allan, Allan against me.

Mostly we followed my grandmother's advice: "Never go to bed angry." But when we did go to bed angry, I couldn't sleep. I ached myself sick. But habit would often take over and before dawn, one of us would find forgiveness and wrap around the other. I was always grateful in those moments. No argument was worth the misery of sleep without touch.

The nights after Allan died were hard. I can't say they were the hardest, because each second of each day and night I was engulfed in the kind of pain I had only heard about from others. For a couple of those first nights alone, I drifted into a drug-induced nothingness and woke in a morning stupor. Better to feel the hole in my heart, descend into the void than deny my pain with sleeping pills. After Allan's funeral, I quit the pills and embraced my grief.

These ten months later and I am not done with grief and probably never will be. I still sleep on Allan's side of bed and sometimes wake up thinking he is there. Sometimes I hear his voice or sense his presence in the grainy shadows. Dreams and memories blur in the night and can come round any corner and face me down. In the shadows, I realize that I really do like the black hole that is my grief. It's my way to hold him close if only through an aching heart.

The problem with my black hole is I keep bumping up against life and know the void will slowly recede. I am afraid some days that if I keep living, eventually life will trickle in and I will feel ashamed. If I lean into the light, and I know that I must eventually, if I let go of my darkness, I worry that I will lose Allan again. Yet maybe in the light, if I go there, I might find the sweetness that was once ours. For now, I do my best each day to embrace both my life and my grief.

Chapter Twelve: Blurring the Lines

Erosion

Helen stood and looked out the living room window for a long time. Liam and I were married two months after I was released from the hospital. His mother could still make me uncomfortable. I waited for her to say something. She moved towards the recliner slowly and eased herself down. My mother-in-law was getting old. Her white hair was thin and the stoop in her back was pronounced.

Helen sighed, “He’s late. Nothing new here.”

I heard the key in the door and we both look up. There could be trouble. I asked Helen, “Guess you noticed the bank down by the shore? We lost ten pines in the storm last night.”

“You both knew that would happen sooner or later, Elspeth, but he let it go and it’s too late to save the rest of the trees. The eagle tree will go next, I suppose. His father would be heart broken.”

I did know the tree where the eagle perched for hours at a time would be the next tree to fall into the bay. I didn’t need her to tell me. I didn’t like that she called me Elspeth or the tone of her voice either.

“We’re all heartsick,” I said.

Helen straightened her shoulders and turned to me. “Of course you are, I’m sorry. If you and Liam would let me, I could help with the restoration cost.” There was an unusual tremble in her voice.

Liam cursed softly. The bi-fold door in the front closet had come off the track again. I waited for the crash that didn’t come. He caught it in time.

Helen slumped down further into the chair and turned back to the window. “Better go.”

As if I wasn’t on my way....

“Did you need me, Liam?” I didn’t wait for an answer. “The door will be easier to put back on track if I help.” In the hall, I whispered, “I thought you would never get home. She’s in a mood.”

Liam shouted toward the living room, “Mom, your favorite son is home. Couldn’t wait to see me, could you?”

“You know it,” she yelled back. “Thought you were going to fix that door the last time I was here.”

“I’m on it now.”

He pulled me close and asked, “How long is she staying, El? Doesn’t matter, just don’t let her get under our skin this time, eh.”

“Already too late for me. Did you see we lost another group of trees since this morning?”

“But the view, something isn’t it? We can see clear across the bay, past the harbour. Never thought we’d have a view of the dunes did you El? Beautiful isn’t it. Never mind the bank. We will deal it after Mom goes.”

Liam stayed close. I saw the wet mud on his pant legs and shoes and knew the worry in his eyes. He’d been on the beach before he came into the house. That’s why he was late.

“I’ll take that job in Alberta,” I say.

He smiled, “We’ll be ok, Love. You wouldn’t have to do that. You’re not well enough yet. The doctor said it would be a year before you’re fully recovered. Besides, who would keep me warm at night if you go?”

Helen came into the hallway. I thought there was such stiffness in their embrace.

“You’re late,” Helen said.

“So El says. Late for what exactly? Chicken, lobster, or steak and pie? Did you bake me one of your pies, Mom? I’ve been dreaming about it all day. ”

They laughed and I was relieved.

Alone in Stillness

May 5, 2014

At home on my front deck, watching the sun climb, I listen to the joy of birds calling to each other in the woods across the road. I know myself differently outside. Perhaps that's because I feel a part of something that is bigger than myself and I find some comfort in that. The sun is at eleven o'clock. I've been sitting at the patio table, writing, thinking, and listening for a couple of hours. I study the new gap in the bank and calculate that for the price of a small car, I can repair and protect the shoreline from further erosion. I watch as the fog floats over the bay towards me. And as I watch, the fog changes to mist and the mist dissolves into wisps that drift across the lawn and finally disappear up the road.

Alone and still with the sounds of birds and squirrels, buzzing flies and the soft distant rumble of mussel boat motors in the channel. Alone and still with lifting fog and disappearing mist, I sit. The last snow bank down by the shore chills the air. I feel snow crystals tickle my cheeks as the off shore breeze brushes by my place in the sun. Beige grass turns green. I glory in the day. At home with the metamorphosis surrounding me, I awaken alone.

Last year, spring was ours to share, Allan's and mine. There were pelicans and palm trees, mountain deserts and dust storms, over flowing rivers and the teeming sounds of awakening cypress swamps. Yet in the same way, alone now at home, brown grass still turns green before my eyes. White puffs of cloud drift and this blue, blue Island sky stirs my core. Last year, peace shared, this year peace alone. Yet it is the same kind of

peace that prickles me conscious, pulls me deep inside the place I love best, the place that sings in harmony with a chorus that is universal.

The spring peepers woke last night. Welcome peepers, jubilant, exuberant and joyful sounds. In the same moment as I listen to the peepers, I touch despair and joy, I understand and yet know nothing, I ache and long, yet breathe in life and know I am not one who died.

Just Write It

Reflections: On writing for my thesis advisor

May 5, 2014

After all this time, it doesn't matter much what I write, only that I write. If I engage in either life writing or fiction, I find many similarities in the process. Sometimes I hate writing because it takes me places I don't want to go. I love writing because sometimes it takes me places I do want to go. Writing drives writing and writing inspires new thought. For instance, I was thinking about this chapter on blurring the lines between the writing genres. Not sure if I should call it a streaming of styles, a deliberate mixing of writing techniques or a writing experiment. It is writing that includes a snippet of fiction, a snippet of life writing and a reflection on writing about writing.

At a time when I could barely get out of bed, I found refuge in writing. That process of putting words on a page, week after week sustained, in part Sean, because you were my mentor. I felt sheltered and protected and I knew it was safe to share my pages with you. Because of this, day-by-day, I feel the strength in my voice grow.

I finish some piece or other and think it's done, it's perfect and send it off to you, Sean. Only to regret a misplaced word, a paragraph break or a stream of dialogue that doesn't work, grammar, typing and spelling errors. As much as it feels good to let a piece go, it is never really about the finish. It is about the process of creating the piece that matters most. It is the process that I trust. Writing takes me deep into my being and safely lifts me from myself. I believe sometimes that it is a living process that inherently believes in its self.

No real conclusion, but perhaps through life writing, I've found empathy for myself and perhaps through fiction, I am able to empathize more with others. I find comfort in the act of writing. In writing, miraculous as it might seem, I can be simultaneously alone and not alone. Like Leggo (2004), I find that I am also, "...embracing the need to write about my whole experience of becoming human, acknowledging the ecological interconnections of the intellectual, creative, embodied, emotional, and spiritual identities that shape who I am and who I am becoming in the world" (p. 6).

All I know for now is that writing was and continues to be my ladder. Through writing, I can climb up or deep down into a thing. Writing enables me to look inside and outside, to see from a distance, or close up. I write through tears and devastation, sometimes with hope and anticipation. In writing, I eat, sleep, and see, feel, hear, fall down and rise above the darkness that is bigger than my grief. Through the creative writing process, I imagined, described, examined and interrogated my changing context. I put words on a page, words on a screen, words that are founded in my observations, experiences, reflections, and interpretations of place in time, and my story unfolds. I never know what I will find, but inevitably I discover something new when I write and know for certain that writing is as much about learning as it is about the art of creation.

Chapter Thirteen: Creative Writing as a Coming to Know

Writing is about creativity. May (1975) describes creativity this way; “It is the process of bringing something new into being” (p. 39). My experience with writing, generally, and as well as with this thesis, involves slowing down, listening, interrogating, and asking questions, some painful, some not, some old and some new. It’s about inquiry and discovery, pausing over grammar, seeking clarity of thought in words, phrases, and paragraphs. I might ask myself as I begin or restart or edit and redeem a piece of writing, “How long do/should I wait for an idea, how long will it take, how still, how patient must I be, how many more drafts, can I get it right this time?” And I might think, “At any moment I could touch a trickle of truth, see a light flicker in the distance, by chance maybe grasp a few answers to my questions, happen on an idea or learn something new or become aware of something that I already knew.” Creative writing can be about seeking truth, clarity, and beauty, sometimes finding none, one or all of these.

We Write Because

Maybe I write because I discovered that writing is as much about learning as it is about creating something new. Writing excites and invites. It is about exploration, experimentation, and problem solving, and imagining the impossible, possible.

I agree with Leggo (2012) that we write because, “We need to compose and tell our stories as creative ways of growing in humanness” (p. xx). I also believe like Thomas King (2003) that, “The truth about stories is that that’s all we are” (p. 2).

I never know for certain what is going to appear on the page. I begin with an idea and sometimes I understand more about that thing or sometimes it becomes something I

never expected. Sometimes writing is more about getting the mechanics right: punctuation, pauses, grammar, or structure. Sometimes it is about open-minded imaginings and what if's— meshing characters, timelines, plot, setting, and description. Sometimes it is more about cadence and rhythm or voice and how the parts fit together. Often as Steven King (2000) said, “Writing is magic, as much the water of life as any other creative art. The water is free. So drink. Drink and be filled up” (p. 270).

I believe there is a world of knowledge and potential learning just below the surface of writing. Cixous' (1991) description of the writer and writing adds credence to this belief:

Because whoever writes doesn't know. Which doesn't prevent writing from creating truth without knowing that it does so, the way we sometimes create light, groping around in the dark and finding the unhoped-for-body. ... Writing: touching the mystery, delicately, with the tips of the words, trying not to crush it, in order to un-lie (p.134).

Writing is a search for meaning that does not often succeed. King (2000) put it this way, “The word is only a representation of the meaning; even at its best, writing almost always falls short of full meaning” (p. 118).

Perhaps writers write to learn something new. As Chambers (2004) wrote, “I think we write to figure something out; it might be something small, and it might be something big” (p.10).

Some writers write to connect with others (the reader). In *On Writing, a Memoir of the Craft*, King (2000) described his motivation: “What I want most of all is resonance,

something that will linger for a while in Constant Reader's mind (and heart) after he or she has closed the book and put it up on the shelf" (p. 214).

I know that sometimes when I write, I touch places in my core that otherwise I may never experience. Perhaps writers then write to connect with self. For instance, May (1975) says, "The artist is not a moralist by conscious intention, but is concerned with hearing and expressing the vision within his or her own being" (p. 26).

In the depths of profound grief it is not a surprise that my plan to journal about the writing process shifted to a life writing process. Keeping a journal was not enough. Journaling for me was akin to taking a snapshot, a means to save a moment, an experience in one dimension until I had the inclination and time to examine the multi-dimensional aspects of that moment or experience. At first, I floundered alone and disoriented in a changed world. I wrote so that I would not be so alone; I wrote to preserve my memories of the love of my life. I wrote to understand this word "widow". I probed life and documented it, created images and dismantled them. I wrote about identity, love and loss. Life writing helped me face Allan's death and the death of my mother five months later. Writing helped me accept my own mortality and navigate loss. I wrote through grief and relived my past, dissected my present and simultaneously feared and embraced my future. Because I wrote, I survived and came to know some things I didn't know before.

Writing as a Meeting Place for Reflection, Holistic Awareness and Transformation

Writing Involves Reflection

I might begin a writing exercise by reflecting on a place, an event, or a thing. Reflection can be a precursor to writing. Reflection can inspire and fuel the writing

process. I may ruminate for hours, days or weeks before I find a way to express my thoughts in words. I have an affinity with nature and it is when I am in the world outside that I reflect the most. When I hear the spring peepers in full voice, and taste the summer's salty spray off the sea, and inhale the fall musk of rotting leaves under my feet, and shiver as a prickly December gale traces its path down the back of my neck into my core, I come alive with the wholeness of the experience (holistic awareness) and then upon reflection I come to know a little more about myself.

I share Knowles' (2001) sensibilities about nature's effect on my being: "I know from deep in my body that experiences of place have shaped who I am. Experiences, especially, of the natural world – are often profoundly provocative. They prompt thought, reflection, self-analysis, and wondering" (p. 97).

I came across a number of writers who stated that reflection was one of the necessary elements of their work. Arts-informed research and writing inquiry, according to Knowles and Cole (2008), "... has strong reflective elements" (p. 61). de Mello (2007) in reference to arts-informed narrative concurs: "I believed that conceptualizing experience narratively is a powerful way to provoke reflection and transformation" (p. 204). Poetic inquiry (another form of writing inquiry), by design, allows for reflection and a possibility of transformation as is illustrated in this excerpt from *Of Earth and Flesh and Bone and Breath* by Suzanne Thomas (2004):

Reflection stills memory
 freezes sensations
 as my body swells
 with inner-shaped skeletal forms

of bone and breath

re-constructing forms of knowing

altered states of being.

I am stilled in the silence of reflection (p. 182-183).

Ewing and Hughes (2008) make the case that there is ‘no better way’ to study artistry than through a reflective lens: “Arts-informed inquiry encourages reflectivity. It has the capacity to promote artistic self-expression that can enable more delicate and nuanced self-examination and vulnerability” (p. 516).

Murray also (2005) tells us that writing can be a tool for reflection; “Writing allows writers to stand back from personal experience, the way an artist stands back from a painting, to see their lives more clearly, and it is a tool for reflection” (p. 53).

That reflection is an integral component of my own writing process is true. Reflection widens the angle of my perspective, focuses my concentration differently and can, at times, profoundly change the way I understand and know the subject of my writing inquiry.

Writing Involves Holistic Awareness

Writing elevates attention to holistic awareness. Peepers and salty spray, rotting leaves and winter winds caress me in indescribable ways. I may feel joy or be struck with awe, but somewhere in there is an ineffable, absolute knowing of universality and this is an important part of my writing process.

I believe this is so because the writer has to think about what she sees, hears, smells, tastes, and feels. The writer pays close attention to language and voice. The writer studies and asks questions about the particular— setting, plot, character, and emotion.

The writer has to consider vantage point, place and point of view and make decisions to filter, censor and include details that are most relevant to a piece. In this case it didn't matter if I was working on a writing inquiry section or fiction, the act of putting thoughts into words elevated my attention to details.

In *Of Dogs and Dissertations: Notes on Writing and Life*, Cole (2010), struggling with the praxis of writing inquiry, attempts to explain the holistic nature of the writing process as follows:

Writing is an act of attunement that depends on the interrelated engagement of mind, body, emotion and soul. Working to conceptualize, clarify, and articulate ideas; striving to make meaning of mounds of research material; yearning and struggling in earnest for moments of revelation and insight; and desperately searching for exactly the right words to say what seems so clear in my head and heart is an agonizingly elusive process of tough thinking and sense-making (p. 10).

Neilsen (1998) also suggests that holistic awareness is a key component of the writing process: "Somewhere Out There, which was my youthful awareness of the world of knowledge and my outsider relationship to that world, no longer exists Everything we know is at once out there and in here, as is everything we will come to know" (p. 261).

According to Knowles and Cole (2008), "From purpose to method to interpretation and representation, arts-informed research is a holistic process and rendering that runs counter to more conventional quantitative research endeavors that tend to be more linear, sequential, compartmentalized..." (p. 67).

As I wrote, attended to, and fine-tuned the elements in this inquiry, I experienced some flashes of holistic awareness. Holistic awareness is multi-dimensional. It involves the heart and the tear, the tangible and ethereal, the senses and making sense. And sometimes in moments of absolute awareness, the dimensions of inquiry merge for the writer and a new insight surfaces.

Simons & McCormack (2007), in a discussion about arts-based research, attributed holistic awareness to the creative process:

In terms of the process itself ... creative arts in evaluation can serve to enhance evaluation methodologies by generating a form of holistic knowing that overcomes mind-body duality, that incorporates emotions and intellect and that provides a multidimensional and embodied understanding of evaluation programs and projects (p. 308).

Shira (2012) captured the value of a holist point of view in a different way: “When we don’t cling to our experiences as a separate self, we become free to experience life as a vast and vivid array of interconnections” (p. 154).

Lori Neilson’s (1998) rationale for applying a holistic technique in writing inquiry is clear. She said, “Letting go, as we observe, write, talk and fully attune ourselves to processes of inquiry commonly brings a heightened sensory awareness, similar to the awareness of artists engaged in creative activity” (p. 277).

When I was writing this thesis, it was hard sometimes for me to let go, get out of my own way so to speak and just write. The more I wrote, the more I trusted in the writing process. I embraced Murray’s (2005) notion that, “The first gift of writing is an aggressive awareness of the life we have lived and are living” (p. 182).

Sometimes when I really let go and embraced the writing process, I did experience joy and insight and holistic awareness. Like King (2000), “If there is anything I love about writing more than the rest, it’s that sudden flash of insight when you see how everything connects” (p. 204).

Often when I write, the following Dzogchen quote resonates with me: “One instant of total awareness is one instant of perfect freedom and enlightenment” (as cited in Das, 2005, p. 50). I have come to accept that holistic awareness is just another naturally occurring aspect of the writing process. Perhaps the author’s search for total awareness for another way of knowing is in the end the ultimate motivator for all manner of writers.

Writing and Transformation

My experience with writing this thesis has been transformative. Maybe I have come to this because writing is often about the interconnection and intersection of reflection and holistic awareness and how these elements can sometimes generate transformation. Like Stewart (2012), I think,

Through writing we make discoveries, we come to know, eventually our thoughts become clearer to us. ... The path is bumpy as I learn to read and write in new ways, searching for threads, inviting a new engagement with the world and the word (p. 46-47).

It is a paradox that change is a predictable constant in life. Change often denotes transformation although we might not be transformed with every change. In the same manner, I think that when we learn or come to understand a thing for the first time, we are transformed by the experience. And this is the place in my work where learning and

writing intersect. In the case of good writing, what Laplante (2009) says rings true: “The best writing is less about dispelling than about acquiring wisdom, less about explaining the point of a given experience to others than about exploring and learning about it oneself” (p. 37).

Through the creative writing process, I have experienced new insights. I have come to believe that there is a strong correlation between insight and transformation. I also believe in the transformative power of creative imaginings “to disturb and disrupt the familiar and commonplace” as Barone and Eisner (2012) suggest:

Works of fiction may indeed, through their recasting of the empirical particulars of the world, achieve extraordinary power to disturb and disrupt the familiar and commonplace, to question and interrogate that which seems to have already been answered conclusively, and to redirect the conversation regarding important social issues (p. 101).

After spending months with this writing project, I think it is reasonable to suggest that writing inquiry and fiction writing are transformative processes. I say this because by the time I wrote and submitted each section of this work, from the raw and naked first draft to the more polished third draft, inevitably something new was revealed to me. Sometimes it was something small. For instance, one day last summer as I was writing outside I became keenly aware of birdcalls. By the end of that day I could distinguish the calls of an eagle from that of an osprey. It was a small thing but it was a thing that Allan had always done for me and now I could hear the difference myself. I could hear the difference because writing heightened my attention. Sometimes I uncovered bigger

insights when I wrote. For example, I unearthed the perfect metaphor to represent my feelings about death and resilience when I wrote the chapter, *My Silver Fox*.

If writing helps one to uncover knowledge, new or old, then writing must also have the power to transform who we are, what we think of others, and ourselves and how we act in this world.

Meyer (2010) designed a graduate research course using living inquiry as a “distinct learning experience” (p. 96). In this model of inquiry, students and teacher attend to and document daily life using four common themes: *place, language, time, self/other*. In reflections about the program Meyer (2010) had this to say: “I became more aware of what it means to be me, an individual in the human condition of plurality— an encounter between self and self and oneself and other” (p. 95). Just as Meyer became more aware of self and others with the design and implementation of her graduate course, the design and implementation of my writing inquiry also heightened my sense of belonging and humanity and afforded me (in Meyer’s terms) “a distinct leaning experience”.

Trust in the writing process came naturally to me. The works presented in this thesis are as honest as I could make them. It was important throughout the process to tell and reflect the truth. I was and remain deeply connected to this work and hope, like Cole (2010) in referring to her own writing, that my work also, “...reflects who I am, how I make sense of the world, and how I might make a difference through what I do” (p. 95).

Purpose, Process and Perspective

I believe that no matter the genre, a journey into writing involves the intersection of reflection, holistic awareness, and transformation. I am also aware that different genres

do in fact have varying purposes. As Leavy (2013) has cautioned, it is important to, “Remember, although writers creating fiction-based research use many of the same tools as literary writers, they have at least in part different goals. With that said, there is always a balance to be struck between artfulness and usefulness (between aesthetics/craft and substantive contribution)” (p. 90).

Banks (2008) in a rationalization of using scholarly fiction as a means of inquiry said:

The natural history of conventional social science is that of a real world being articulated in imagined details; the natural history of fiction is that of an imaginary world being articulated in real details. The former helps us understand what people are while the latter helps us understand who people can be (p. 162).

If I think in Banks’ terms, then, I do believe that this writing inquiry has taught me a great deal about self and others. In writing about what and who I am, and who I might become, I have brushed up against what I can best describe as a heightened sense of humanity.

Over the course of writing this thesis, I deliberately switched between life writing and fiction. This approach helped me maintain consistency in form and technique throughout the inquiry. One submission would be a life writing piece and the next was a fiction piece. My writing inquiry was partially based on this switch up. I was looking for differences in the purpose, process, and my own perspectives as I switched between the genres. That reflection, holistic awareness, and transformation emerged as natural themes in both genres did not surprise me but I was enriched by the experience of these themes especially when I arrived at that place where they intersected.

Although the lines between the writing genres were blurry and also intersected at times, altering between the genres helped me keep a focus on the inquiry's questions and therefore purpose. I attended to the creative process and life experiences that influenced both my life writing and fiction stories.

Within the framework described above I began this inquiry with an open mind and a need to write. I wrote and was both energized and exhausted by the process. In the end, I forged a strong trust in the creative writing process and honestly told two very different stories with different purposes and perspectives. However, as I switched between the genres, I didn't find much difference in the creative writing process itself.

As Leavy (2013) said, "It is not as if fiction writers created fantasies and researchers recorded facts. The materials writers use in fiction comes from real life and genuine human experience. Similarly, qualitative researchers very much shape every aspect of their investigation, imbuing it with meaning and marking it with their fingerprint" (p. 21).

I can also relate to Rishma Dunlop's (2001) description of the relationship between fiction and research and some of the ways that fiction can be a valuable method of inquiry. She discusses some of the research and inquiry possibilities available to a writer of fiction in the following excerpt from her novel *Boundary Bay*: "The writer becomes the books she frequents, journeying through books and creating fiction as a primary source of speaking about the human experience" (p. 12). I also believe that the author or reader of fiction doesn't much care if the specific events or places or people are real but more that the recounting resonates as a true representation of life. I think it matters more, as Dunlop put it, that the writing "speaks about the human experience". In

a different context, Burroway (2007) said something similar about writing. Her advice to fiction writers working on character development was to imagine (human) action as one; “...that for the reader rings universally true” (p. 142).

Between Blurred Lines, Intersections, and Coming to Know

I wrote for months. I wrote in the belief that truth would reveal itself if I trusted enough in the process. I approached writing with trust. Like Murray (2005) I thought that, “I write in ignorance having faith I will write what I didn’t know I knew” (p. 52). I blended two genres and thought I was onto something special. I ended with a chapter on blurring the lines between life writing and fiction and discovered Murray and knew once again that I was not alone. As Murray (2005) put it, “The only requirement is that my story be true. ...I do not feel any different when I write poetry and fiction than I do when writing non-fiction. Good writing is not a matter of genre and neither is bad. Writing is writing” (p. 317).

I lived for a long time between grief and sorrow, trying to find my way in a changed world, getting by through writing. Writing was writing and I didn’t feel any great differences between the genres— life writing and fiction. My perspective shifted sometimes when I wrote fiction. I thought more about others and imagined what someone else might think, might do, might say in a situation and felt empathy. When I engaged in life writing, I felt more empathy for myself.

In both genres I would finish a piece and sometimes experience joy and glory. Sometimes I would read a piece over and be humbled by my inadequacy. Noticing what was not clear or not said, on the edge of a thought too painful to explore or helpless to

find the flow of words, or tone or voice that said what I wanted the piece to say. As Leggo (2001) wrote, it became important to me to:

read the margins where
the words begin and end
read the spaces in the words
where the unwritten is written
read beyond my words
to scribbled words
of others almost hidden
in my words (p. 19-20).

By nature and design this project was organic—emergent and natural. I employed the art of writing through the heart and concurrently probed and described my personal experience with loss and love and imagined a different kind of love and loss story using fiction. I choose this approach because, like Leggo (2001):

I want research that knows its humility, its futility, its volatility, that seeks its validity and reliability in places other than statistics. The organic cannot be reduced. Like organ music, the whole exceeds the parts. There is something ineffable that holds the parts together. This ineffability is not possible without the parts, but the parts only become organic in the instance that they sing out ineffability. Research is akin to Sherlock Holmes' concocting a story out of a few traces, but instead of Holmes' deductive logic, I want to read the traces with heart. I want to evoke or conjure wholeness from the traces (p. 180-189).

I believe that qualitative research, in particular writing inquiry, is an organic and naturally emerging process. It is about learning. It is about creative inquiry, interpretation, investigation, and discovery. New knowledge and heightened consciousness become possible when the mind and heart are open and one trusts in both the creative and the inquiry process. This type of inquiry often begins in ambiguity and as the process evolves, something new often comes into being. I believe that the perquisites for undertaking a qualitative study apply equally to writing inquiry. Schram (2003) highlighted some of those requirements this way:

The focus of a qualitative study unfolds naturally in that it has no predetermined course established or manipulated by the researcher such as a laboratory or other controlled setting. Being open and pragmatic to this degree requires that you possess a high comfort level with ambiguity and uncertainty as well as trust in the ultimate value of what an emergent and largely inductive analytical process will provide (p. 7).

This inquiry involved both a great deal of writing and a great deal of reading. In that regard, I heeded King's (2000) advice: "You learn best by reading a lot and writing a lot, and the most valuable lessons of all are the ones you teach yourself" (p. 236). I read, I wrote, and some of the valuable lessons I taught myself were how to foster patience, perseverance and faith in the creative writing process.

Write By Heart

I agree with Lori Neilsen (1998) that there was a story to be found behind my approach to inquiry: "Behind every object, every inquiry, is a story. Perhaps all inquiry is story" (p. 131). Lori Neilsen is a self-described feminist, writer and researcher. After

years of working as a qualitative researcher and writer, Neilsen sees value in seeking knowledge and doing research by less conventional approaches, in her case, through writing inquiry. Neilsen (1998) put it this way:

... I take comfort, perhaps even joy, in now seeking without apology, those inquiry approaches and rationale which wild emotion can pierce, learning to develop ways of doing and thinking in literacy that are closer to fusing mind and body, heart and head (p. 99).

Wiebe also advances the engagement of heart and art as an important approach to inquiry. His thoughts in particular for writing poetry helped me envision ways I might employ fiction as a means for inquiry. Wiebe (2012) promotes artful inquiry (in the form of poetry) as follows: “To approach the translation of my life poetically means to utilize artful and poetic means to inquire and theorize, to form and reform, to question and trouble, and to make merry in the meaning and process of living” (p. 202-203).

Chambers and Sameshima also gave me confidence to incorporate the language of heart and love in my work. On love of learning and living and the reciprocal benefits of an open heart, Chambers (2012) has this to say: “I needed to fall out of love with knowing and being right and fall in love with learning and living” (p. 189). Sameshima (2007) built her award winning doctoral dissertation by writing, “... a steamy set of letters about learning” (p. 51). In *Seeing Red*, she recalled what she knew about Socrates’ teacher— a grammarian and a woman who taught him about love. Triggered by her knowledge about Socrates’ teacher, Sameshima (2007) came to this conclusion: “When words and love are meshed, great understandings and learning become possible” (p. 210)!

Chambers (2004) also uses the notion of the heart in her work. She put it this way; “I know something matters when it keeps me awake, or when I’m compelled to rise from my bed in the middle of the night or the early dawn to write. Sometimes it’s in these wee hours when the rest of the world lies still enough so I can hear my heart speaking” (p. 9).

This work consumed me for over a year and, yes, it did keep me up some nights. I wrote and struggled to understand and make sense of my life and in the end my heart could not but come to the page.

Chapter Fourteen: Writer Transformed

Throughout this inquiry I considered these questions: how does writing contribute to our understanding of self and others; in what ways does creative writing focus our attention differently; and by what means might writing lead to transformation. After all these months and changed life circumstances, I don't have many answers. But I know for certain because I wrote honestly and by heart, that I did come to understand a little more about self/others. My attention was frequently heightened by the writing process, and for a few special moments, I did glimpse holistic awareness. That I underwent a transformation during this time is unquestionable. Mostly, grief transformed me. But it is also true that writing helped me examine the impact of my grief. Writing also transformed me in that, day by day, I am able to lean into the light just a little longer. I am able to lean into the light because I share Freeman's (2007) view that:

Perhaps the aim of the autobiographer or memoirist is simply to write as interestingly and as artfully as possible. This would not only spare one the (illusory) burden of somehow discovering and disclosing the (real, authentic) self; it would allow for the possibility of creating, through writing a new self altogether (p. 134).

Perhaps on some level I always knew this, but now I know for certain that writing is as much about learning as it is about the art of creation. It is also true that in the practice of writing, the writer is often transformed.

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